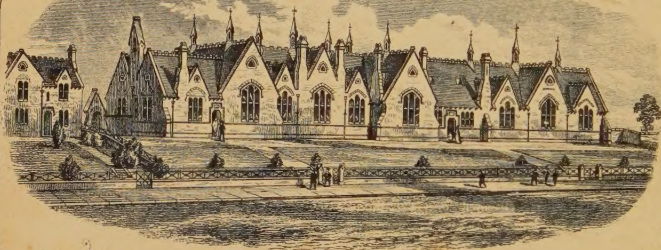


The cover features a decorative border of various plants. At the top, there are yellow flowers and leaves. On the left side, there are red flowers and green leaves. At the bottom, there are green leaves and a small rock. The title is written in a stylized, black, serif font, with the words 'THE' and 'OF' in smaller letters. The background is a textured, olive-green color.

THE
CHORISTERS OF
RAVENSWOOD





Portobello Burgh Public School

SESSION 1892.

2nd PRIZE. STANDARD II

AWARDED BY
PORTOBELLO SCHOOL BOARD.

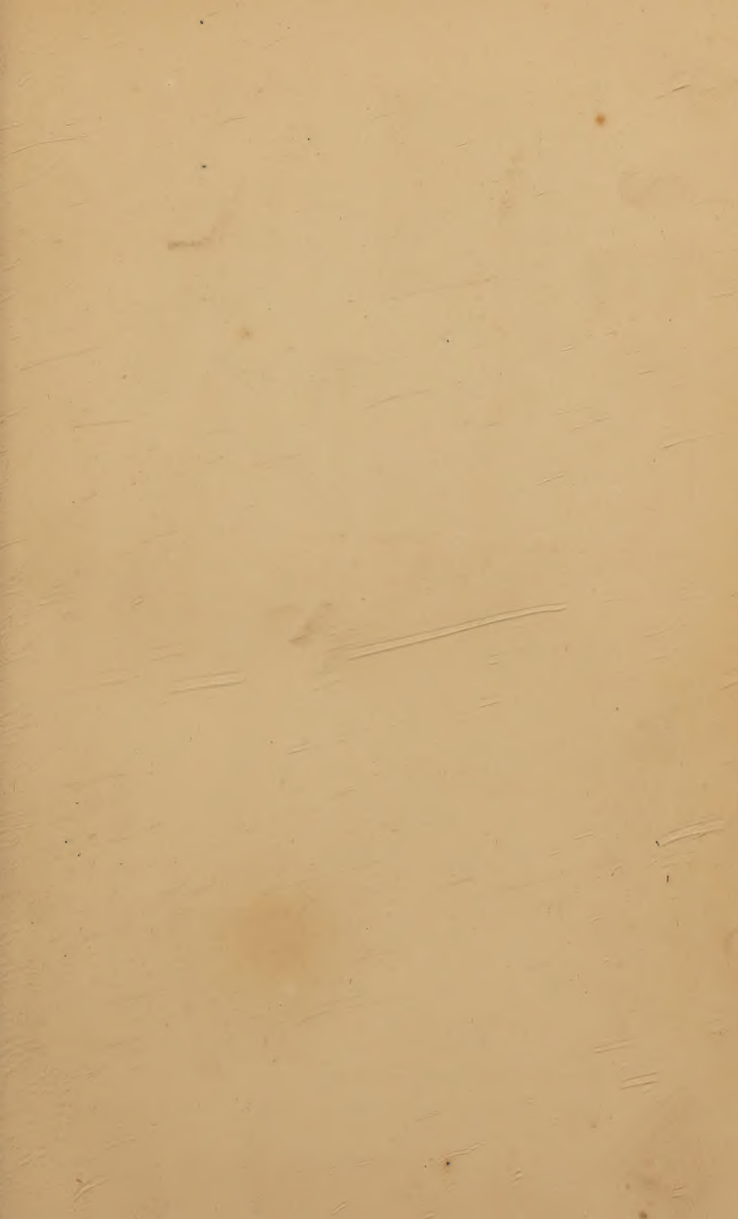
To *Joseph Fairholm*
For Excellence in

ATTENDANCE.

DAVID GRIEVE,
Chairman of School Board,
JOHN STEVENSON,
Head Master.

THE CHORISTERS OF RAVENSWOOD.

Ballantyne Press
BALLANTYNE, HANSON AND CO.
EDINBURGH AND LONDON





"He had a strange faculty for reading people's characters in their faces, and his first glance pleased him much."

—"THE CHORISTERS OF RAVENSWOOD," page 52.

Frontispiece.

THE
CHORISTERS OF RAVENSWOOD.

BY
ALICE F. JACKSON,
AUTHOR OF "MATTIE'S MISTAKE."

ILLUSTRATED.

EDINBURGH:
W. P. NIMMO, HAY, & MITCHELL.
1892.



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THE CHORISTERS OF RAVENSWOOD.

CHAPTER I.

THE DEAD CURATE.

IT was Thursday—the Thursday before Whit-Monday—four o'clock and closing time. The boys rushed out of school with joyous shouts—shouts such as school-boys only can give—as they flung their caps in the air and gathered in knots to discuss the plans for holiday-making on the coming Monday.

“The Church fellows aren’t going to have their treat on Whit-Monday,” said a tall lad, joining a group of boys.

“We know that,” cried a chorus; “’tis because the curate’s dead. They are going to bury him to-morrow.”

The speakers were all Dissenters. The National

School was the only school at Ravenswood, so boys of all denominations attended it.

"Poor chaps!" said a voice, and the speaker turned a pair of pitying eyes on a group of 'Church fellows.' "'Twill be hard to miss the treat, eh, lads?"

They did not seem to need pity just then, to judge by their fresh, happy-looking faces as they whooped and shouted with the rest.

"Who's for a race down the hill?" and with a "one, two, three, and away!" off rushed the whole six helter-skelter—pell-mell! their glad laughter borne on the summer air. Who could help being glad? Not those boys certainly, when the June sun was shining, and the birds singing, and the scent of flowers stealing up from the cottage gardens as they sped past them with flying feet. At the foot of the hill they stopped for want of breath, gasping, panting. "Martin's won! Martin's won! and little Bertie's last!"

"Look at his long legs!" retorted Bertie, flushed and heated, bringing up the rear. "I say, lads!"—he stopped short, and the boys' eyes followed his. At the foot of the hill was a pretty stone house, standing in its own garden, where white pinks and forget-me-nots and Scotch roses flourished, and a passion-flower crept up the wall. The boy's eyes were raised to the windows where the white blinds were all pulled down.

"Sh—sh, lads!" the murmur ran through them, and with somewhat shamed and awe-stricken faces they gathered about the iron gate, trying to stifle their hurried breathing.

"He *was* good to us," whispered Bertie with quivering lip, his startled eyes still fixed on the drawn blinds. "Say, lads, he's in Paradise sure?"

No one answered the half-appealing question. Martin turned away and gulped down the lump in his throat that Bertie's sob had brought there.

"Do you mind the sermon he preached 'bout Paradise the week afore he died?" he went on, pulling Martin by the jacket—"Martin, d'ye mind?"

"Ay, Bertie; don't take on so, lad. If it's all true what he told us, we ought not to want him back, if he's there."

"*If* he's there!" echoed Kenny Froome indignantly. "Say, lads, who'd get up there if *he* warn't fit?"

"We shouldn't have raised such a clatter," said David Barnes. He was a thin sallow-faced lad, rather short for fifteen years old, with a frown that came and went very quickly on his brow, and a pair of deep-set dark eyes that looked remarkably intelligent.

The house before which they lingered was the curate's, or had been, for the curate of Ravenswood lay dead, sleeping his last sleep in one of the upper rooms behind those drawn blinds. His had been a sudden death. He was well and strong a week ago—then a short sharp illness, and the news of Mr. Linton's death spread like wildfire through the parish, falling like a knell on everybody's heart, for he had been much loved by them all. He had been with them just ten months, and had taken

their hearts by storm. He was young, and handsome, and good, and rich—very rich indeed for Ravenswood.

“The poor will miss him; he was a good friend to them,” said Mr. Jasper, the master of the largest draper’s and grocer’s shop in Ravenswood, as he counted out the change to an old woman across the counter. “He has improved the town already, but the poor will need him most.”

“And the faint-hearted, and the weary, and those who want help in holy things; it will be more than the poor who will need him,” answered the woman. “We did not love him for his riches, Mr. Jasper.”

They were both right. The poor would miss him; they began to miss him already, and he had been dead three days. He gave his money with a lavish hand to them, while his lips spoke words of peace and comfort in their strife. And others who were not poor missed him, too. His religion was so cheery, he was so helpful and zealous.

Look at the choristers lingering at the gate—that tear in Bertie’s eye, and Martin’s quivering lip—Kenny Froome’s indignant “*If* he’s there,” and David’s shame at their noisy clatter—it showed their love for him, their reverence and respect, and with lowered voices, and tears in more than Bertie’s eyes, they whispered of his fitness, and the Paradise where he had gone.

Suddenly, though noiselessly, the front door opened, and a lady in deep mourning stood within the entrance. The boys began to slink away, cast-

ing furtive glances at her, wondering who she was, for they had never seen her before; but she raised her hand and beckoned them to come within the gate, and as they hesitated from shyness, she said in a sweet yet commanding voice, so like the dead curate's, "Boys, come here."

There was no resisting it; they slunk forward shamefacedly, as boys do when accosted by a stranger, and stood before her awkwardly, with a hurried snatching off of caps.

She had heard their noisy clatter down the hill, and the stoppage at the gate, and parting one of the drawn blinds, had peeped out to see the awe upon their faces, and Bertie's uplifted hand, with the tear upon his cheek.

"Boys," she said softly, and her voice trembled, "you were speaking of him?" She raised her hand to one of the upper windows of the chamber where the dead man lay.

She was a very handsome woman—tall, and fair-complexioned, with a quantity of dark rich hair; but her face was pale and sad, and her eyes were heavy with weeping.

"Mr. Linton used to teach us the anthems and chants; we're the choir boys, please," said Bertie, with a sob.

"I guessed as much," she said, putting her hand on Bertie's head. "I have heard so often of the Ravenswood choir boys, and so much about them, that I seem to know you well. I am Mr. Linton's sister; have you never heard of me?"

"Yes, ma'am," answered Martin; "he did often

tell us about you—he said that you were coming to Ravenswood in the autumn.”

“Man proposes, but God disposes. Boys, do you know the meaning of that? Yes; we had arranged many months ago that I should pay you all a visit. We had planned so much of what we should do. He talked so lovingly always of his work, and I was so anxious to see him here with you all. I looked forward to it every day, and yet, dear lads, our Heavenly Father saw fit to change all our plans. It is God’s will,” she said, pressing her hands together, “though at first it seems hard to say ‘Thy will be done.’ He was so good and faithful, so strong and hearty and fit for work; yet God knew that his work was done on earth. Would you not like to look at him once more?”

She retreated into the hall. Bertie made a movement to join her, and the rest followed. The house was so silent and dark, their footfalls echoed noisily as they stumbled up the stairs. Boys never can walk softly; their boots seem to persist in creaking, and their feet would shuffle and knock against each other though they tried so hard to keep them under control. Miss Linton did not look shocked, nor did she put her finger on her lips in a warning way. She did not say “Hush!” She seemed to understand boys thoroughly, especially that uncomfortable knack of theirs of having no control over their noisy boots. She led the way softly herself, and opened the bedroom door.

They knew the room well. They had often entered it before. The curate had so many curious

things concealed in drawers to show them ; so often had they heard his happy laugh and cheering voice, and now he lay so still.

"Is he dead?" Bertie whispered; "he looks asleep only."

And so he did. The pale, handsome face looked beautifully at rest, the dark moustache drooped over the smiling mouth—and the closed eyes—if they would but open once! A stifled sigh drew their eyes to Miss Linton's. His brown eyes looked on them from her face—her eyes were just like his—dark, and soft, and winning.

"Dead to us," she said, catching Bertie's whisper, "but living in Paradise. Death does not seem dreadful when we look at him. Boys, when you say your prayers to-night, say a little prayer for me, my heart is so heavy and sad. I feel rebellious, it is so hard to part with him; we loved each other dearly. It is so hard to say 'Thy will be done!' Will you ask God to help me?"

There was a murmured assent given awkwardly and shamefacedly, but earnestly too.

"Thank you," she said softly, with trembling lips, "I am glad you have seen him. When the fear of death comes over you boys, as it must often do, for it is so natural, just think of him lying so peacefully here, and believe that 'Death is swallowed up in victory.' You are old enough to know what that means. He himself is not dead—he is living in Paradise—a better and fuller life than we can ever know here. It is only his body that is dead, and the body must die before the soul can have life, just

as a seed must decay in the earth before a plant can grow out of it with its wealth of lovely flowers. When we look at him now it is not himself we really see. Himself was the good deeds, the helpful words, the love to God and man shining in the glance of his dear eyes, and all that we cannot see or hear now; that has gone to bear more flowers in Paradise."

"Can he see us now?" asked Bertie in an awe-struck whisper.

"I think he can. I believe his spirit must hover about those he loved best on earth, ready perhaps to help them to do right, and to prevent them from the wrong." She bowed her face in her hands, and a sob shook her frame.

"We'll never forget him, ma'am," said Martin huskily; "we'll flower his grave on Flowering Sunday as long as we live; don't fret!"

It is a Welsh custom to flower the graves on Palm Sunday, or Flowering Sunday, as it is more generally called in Wales and the counties bordering it. Ravenswood is a pretty village in Gloucestershire, and flowering the graves on Palm Sunday is something to look forward to for many weeks. Children will scour the country round for miles to gather primroses and wild violets, wood anemones, and daffodils to deck the graves of their dead, in wreaths and crosses and other devices. This is done on Saturday evening or early on Palm Sunday morning. The afternoon service is devoted to a special service in memory of the dead, after which the people flock to the cemetery in hundreds to

visit the graves of their own dead, and to criticise the floral decorations on those of others.

"Ay, ay," said Kenny Froome and David, "Ay, ay," answered Will and Harry Blake, "we know where the best of the flowers grows come Flowering Sunday, don't us, lads?" We'll flower his grave always, ma'am, don't you fear!"

"I shall try not to fret nor fear, dear lads," Miss Linton answered, trying to smile through her tears. "My brother told me of this pretty custom of yours of decking the graves with flowers every Palm Sunday; it is a beautiful idea. At first my thought was to take him to my own home and bury him where I could often visit his grave, but I remembered his telling me how much he loved his work and people in Ravenswood, and that he had no wish but to live and die here, so I am content now to let him be buried here, the more so when you all promise so lovingly to tend his grave."

Then she led the way downstairs, and the lads followed her less noisily than they had come up.

"The housekeeper tells me that your school treat on Whit-Monday is to be put off; is it so?"

"Yes, but we don't mind, not a bit," answered the boys stoutly; and Martin added, "we couldn't joy ourselves, we wouldn't like to, with him dead such a little while."

She thanked them with a sad smile, and asked their names, and, when they told them, said she knew them all, for Mr. Linton had often mentioned his choir boys by name. Then they bade her good-bye

and left her in the dark silent house, while they went into the sunshine, and grouped together a little way down the road, and spoke in subdued voices of the quiet dead and the lady who was scarcely a stranger, or she spoke and looked so much like him.





CHAPTER II.

NAT'S BROTHER.

WE'LL never have another like him," said Bertie. "I can't fancy another curate so handsome and all. Did you mind him when the lady spoke? And her eyes—say, lads, couldn't you think he was looking at us?"

"I wish she was going to live here," said David Barnes gloomily. "I'm off if you're coming, Kenny. I've a heap of lessons to prepare by eight o'clock."

David was the pupil-teacher at the National School. He was a sharp lad for fifteen years old, and Mr. Bilham, the master, took great interest in him. He was not a general favourite, though, with the boys, perhaps on account of his sullen disposition, and a habit of looking always on the dark side of things.

"David may be a bit cross now and then—'tis only natural when the poor chap's so fagged with books; he's at 'em from morning to night, and Bilham ain't the softest master," his friends would urge in his defence.

"He needn't be such a wet blanket, and go scowling about on us all. If he's got more lessons to do than us it's his own choosing; no one axed him to be pupil teacher," would be the answer from some lad who had had the benefit of David's angry temper and sullen frowns.

David's and Kenny's way lay in the same direction, so Kenny broke away from the lads and soon overtook the former, who was striding home with a very gloomy face.

"Oh David! your face is as black as thunder. I'm glad I haven't all those books to learn; why you want to be a schoolmaster beats me, and you seem to hate it too!"

"Did I ever tell you I hated my books, Kenny Froome? It's my own choosing," returned David curtly. "Mollycoddles like you might hate them; but you'll come to find that men with learning get better places in the world, and hold their heads higher than dunces."

"Maybe," retorted Kenny, nettled; "but I'd rather be Farmer Joyce's ploughman than sit in that stuffy schoolroom to whack the lads and learn them their lessons, and play the organ all day on a sunshiny Sunday, and 'tend the practices regular."

"As for playing the organ all Sunday—well, you sing at all the services, which comes pretty much to the same thing, and haven't you to 'tend the practices regularly?"

"Ay, but I do it because I like—I could leave off if I like; you will be bound to play for every

service whenever you become organist. But say, David," he said suddenly, laying his hand on the other's arm, "p'raps you'll never become organist now Mr. Linton's dead! Eh, David, who'll pay for your music lessons, I wonder!"

"Ay, I wonder!" returned David bitterly, and with almost a savage nod he parted from Kenny, for here their roads divided, leaving the boy staring after him with a half pitying, half resentful glance.

"And that's the reason of his scowls and short words these last days; he's been thinking of his music lessons that Mr. Linton paid for; well, it went clean out of my head till this moment!" And Kenny set off homewards with a run.

His mother and two grown-up sisters kept the stationer's shop at Ravenswood. Mrs. Froome was handing some stamps over the counter to a clergyman when Kenny went in, and the sisters were laughing and chatting with a young man who had just taken some note paper. They were pretty girls, with a quantity of fluffy fair hair curled on their brows.

"You're late, Kenny," said Jessie; "what have you been doing since school?"

"Girls think a fellow should tell their sisters everything—be tied to their apron strings," said Kenny with a familar nod to the young man.

Both sisters burst out laughing, and Mrs. Froome smiled indulgently. Kenny pushed his cap to the back of his head and whistled with a mannish air.

"Don't tell them what you've been doing, keep them on the stretch," said the young man, laughing, and he held the door open for the clergyman to pass out, and then went himself.

Kenny Froome was a good-looking boy, but he thought himself handsomer than he really was, which spoilt his good looks considerably. There was a good difference of years between his younger sister and himself, and from a baby he had been petted and spoiled. Mrs. Froome and the sisters laughed at his witty remarks, as they called them, though other people thought them bold. Kenny had no father to check his good opinion of himself, and his mother and sisters encouraged it. So Kenny was somewhat conceited. Boys are conceited as well as girls, though boys generally fancy that conceit belongs alone to girls; and a conceited boy is worse than a conceited girl. But Kenny was affectionate and tender-hearted, truthful and honest, helpful to his mother and sisters in their home work: no wonder they loved him dearly!

"Mother," he said anxiously, when the door was shut, "is that clergyman to be our new curate?"

"No, dear, for I asked him. He has just come to help the vicar until a permanent curate comes."

"I wouldn't like him after Mr. Linton," Kenny said, with a shadow falling over his face, "he looks so grave and old. He—he was so full of fun. I hope the other one will be a little like him."

Then he told them about Miss Linton and the visit to the chamber of death.

"And, mother, David Barnes was so awful sharp and scowly, but I found out it's because there'll be no one to pay for his music lessons, now Mr. Linton's dead, and David had set his heart on being organist some day."

"Poor fellow," said Mrs. Froome; "those Barnes boys will miss Mr. Linton very much, he was always so good to the poor."

"Eh, mother! you'd have some of David's sharp words and a fierce scowl if he heard you call them 'the poor.' You should have heard him telling me how he learns his lessons because men with learning get the best places in the world, and that he'll hold his head higher than dunces."

"Did he mean you by the dunce, Kenny?" asked Jessie indignantly.

"Well I suppose so; he's cleverer than me any-ways, and I'm not such a slow one neither."

"I should hope not," retorted Jessie. "If he wants to call people dunces, let him keep himself to his brother. Silly Nat won't make much of a figure in the world, I'm thinking. David has taken all his brother's senses as well as his own, so there's not too much credit in that."

"Nat's a sight better than David any day, if he is silly, Jessie."

"If he is silly," echoed Jessie with a scornful laugh. "I wouldn't give much for a person's senses if he hadn't more than Nat Barnes."

"Now, Jessie and Kenny, don't you abuse Nat," broke in Mrs. Froome, "I won't have it. Nat's a great favourite of mine. As for my opinion, I

think Kenny's quite right in saying 'if' Nat's silly; that's a question as has got to be answered yet. Silly Nat, as folks call him, supports himself and his brother—more than that, he wants to raise David and give him a good education. If that's what people call silly, all I can say is that I wish we had a few more silly folk about Ravenswood."

"Ay, mother dear, you're always right," answered Jessie quickly; "Nat is as good a lad as ever stepped, though I can't say, even to please you, that he's not wanting somewhere; but I had no right to come down on him, and I didn't mean to either; I was only angry against David for calling Kenny a dunce."

"Perhaps he is," laughed Mrs. Froome, with a smile that said as plainly as possible, "Of course he is not—what a ridiculous idea!"

"Mother," cried both sisters indignantly, then, catching the smile, they laughed too.

"To be good is better than to be clever any way, Kenny dear," she said, drawing him to her and pressing a tender kiss on his brow. "When I see silly Nat singing in the choir on Sundays, I often think to myself that he's nearer heaven than most of the other choristers."

At that moment somebody entered the shop, and while his wants are being attended to we must return to David Barnes.

"Ay, I wonder!" he had answered bitterly when Kenny asked who would now pay for his music lessons. "Ay, I wonder!" he said again and again,

each time more bitterly, as he trudged homewards with his satchel of books thrown across his shoulder. His thoughts were full of that calm, restful face lying so still on the pillow, that had forced the tears into his eyes ; but he saw not the rest, nor the calm, nor the peace now ; he saw only that it was dead. " Dead ! " he muttered the word bitterly, not sadly nor fearfully, but bitterly, as if his being dead were an injury done to him—to him—David Barnes.

" Any one else might have died in his place," he said to himself ; " there's the vicar, an old, old man, he might have died—there's heaps of old and sick—but *he* must die—it's like my luck ! "

Large tears gathered in his eyes, his lips quivered, a big lump swelled in his throat, and he could not swallow it down, it came again and again ; but it was not for the dead curate, nor for the sister's sorrow then ; it was for himself—David Barnes.

He had loved the curate well ; it was not that he did not grieve for him. But his heart just now was full only of his own particular loss, and Kenny Froome's question had brought that loss back very urgently. David had been the pupil-teacher some months before Mr. Linton had come to Ravenswood. The curate soon found out the lad's diligence and cleverness, and learned, too, that he had a great love for music. He found him playing a hymn-tune on a penny whistle one day, so correctly and sweetly, that Mr. Linton was surprised and charmed.

" You must take lessons in music, David," he

said, "and we shall have you for our organist some day. It is a great advantage to a national school-master to be able to play the organ; many a one gets a higher salary for his knowledge."

"Ay, sir, I've no doubt," David replied; "but music lessons cost a heap of money."

"And I'll supply the money, David, my lad," said the good curate; "I'll supply the money, and you shall reward me by doing your best to get on; come, it shall be a bargain between us."

So it was settled. In the town, four miles from Ravenswood, lived a celebrated French musician. Mr. Linton arranged matters with him, and David Barnes, gladly, thankfully, gratefully, walked eight miles twice a week for a music lesson.

David sang in the choir, but his voice was not a sweet nor a musical one, on the contrary it was somewhat harsh and grating, yet he could read music easily, better than any other boy in the choir, and that made him a help in the new chants and tunes when the musical ears of the other lads failed them. But his eyes turned longingly to the organ, and his fingers ached to play it and draw out its rich notes, and he envied poor old short-sighted Matthew Evans, who was but an indifferent player. So he kept his part of the bargain faithfully and did his best to get on, and delighted Mr. Linton's heart by his diligence as much as by his aptitude.

The curate's piano was always open to him to practise on, and at any odd moment between school-time, either early in the morning or late in



"Didn't mother tell me to? and I promised Doady, I promised!"

—"THE CHORISTERS OF RAVENSWOOD," page 25.

the evening, David would creep in and diligently prepare his lessons for the French musician.

And now—and now—"It's like my luck," he muttered again "he might have been let to live. I'll never be organist now!" Brooding thus, he reached the gate of his home.





CHAPTER III.

DAVID'S AMBITION.

T was a queer-looking little house, only one storey high, with three little windows, facing the road. It was out of the village a goodish way in the first lane turning down on your right-hand side. It stood back from the lane a good way, and just in front of the middle window was a round flower bed bordered by a hedge of box, and bright with summer flowers. Every other inch of garden, excepting a little foot-path here and there, was neatly planted with vegetables, a bed of potatoes, another of cabbage, broad beans and radishes, lettuce and onions.

A thick-set, broad-shouldered lad, somewhat stunted in height, was weeding the onion bed, and hearing the latch of the gate lifted, he left his work immediately and darted to David's side.

"Doady, Doady, you're late, Doady; I've been and put the kettle on, and tea's been soaking such a time."

He had a shock of red hair, and his face was very freckled; he had large blue eyes, very round

and very blue they were, looking out under the short thick lashes with a very childish expression, beaming with pride and admiration as they rested on David's face.

"Has it, Nat?" said David; "then it ought to be all the better, we'll get all the strength that is to be got out of it this time—let's have it at once; I'm parched for a cup." And the younger brother entered the cottage door followed by the elder.

"So you've had my share of work this evening, lighting the fire and boiling the kettle. Eh, Nat, but you're good to me, lad!"

"Didn't mother tell me to? And I promised, Doady, I promised!"

"You've kept it truly," answered David, with something like a sob in his voice. He was still brooding bitterly over the lost music lessons, but Nat's affectionate welcome brought out better feelings and forced back the desponding ones.

"What is it, Doady?" for Nat's sharp ear had heard the sob.

"We've been to look at him—Mr. Linton—some of the lads and me. We were hanging round by the gate when the door opened and a lady asked us in. It was his sister, and she took us to see him. He looked so restful like; little Bertie thought he was just asleep."

Nat's wide blue eyes filled with tears.

"I'd like to look at him too; would she let me, Doady? I just loved him."

"Ay, lad, sure to, if you asked her. She's that like him I could fancy it was he a-talking, and her

eyes they were brown like his, and kind and soft. She said—eh, Nat ! you'd have liked to hear her 'bout Paradise, and how he was there a-looking on us p'raps."

"I just loved him," Nat said again, the tears coursing down his face, while he filled the teapot on the hob with boiling water, and carried it to a small round deal table that was laid for tea, half a loaf and a piece of butter crowning the centre.

The boys drew up their chairs. Nat clasped his big freckled hands and said grace as a little child does: "For what we are about to receive, Lord, make us thankful." Then he poured out the tea, while David cut some thick slices off the loaf.

Nathaniel Barnes was seventeen years old. If you could have seen his face without seeing his head or shoulders, you would have thought it belonged to a child of eight or nine ; but when you looked on his height and broad shoulders you were convinced he must be almost a man, though wanting a man's intelligence. He was not tall, his growth was stunted, but he was as strong as, if not stronger than, any young fellow of seventeen. People said all his brains had gone into his strength, but if they called him stupid they were quite wrong. No, Nat was far from stupid ; there was a strange simplicity and childishness about his face, and the expression in his eyes, and in his talk generally.

Nat was errand-boy and carrier in Mr. Jasper's shop. He lighted the fires, swept out the shop, cleaned the windows, carried parcels all over Ravenswood, and being a straggling parish, that

meant a radius of a good many miles. Mr. Jasper said he could trust Nat with all the uncounted money in the till, and that, coming from Mr. Jasper, meant a great deal, for Mr. Jasper was called a hard man. Nat had his breakfast and dinner at the shop, and was allowed half an hour at five o'clock to take his tea at home. It was the only meal the brothers had together, and neither of them would have liked to miss it. It was David's work to light the fire when he got back from school, to boil the kettle and prepare the tea, so that Nat might sit down to it at once and enjoy his half hour's rest, for very soon after half-past five he was expected in the shop again, to weigh out pound packets of sugar, if there were no parcels to deliver, and make himself generally useful till seven o'clock, which was closing time. Then Nat put up the shutters, and his day's work at the shop was done.

To-day there was no David to welcome him, no fire lighted, no tea ready, the door was locked, for each boy carried a key. Nat wondered—but came to the conclusion that Mr. Billam had detained David, so, like the good fellow as he was, set about making the tea and had it ready for David instead.

"Did you ask Mr. Jasper for leave to 'tend the funeral to-morrow afternoon?" asked David.

"Ay, Doady, and he give it me for as long as the burying takes. He asked if all the choir lads was going, and said he suppos'd I should have to, since I am one."

"He's a stingy skinflint," said David. "If he

thought no one would know of it he wouldn't let you go, but everyone would cry shame at him not to let a choir lad 'tend the curate's funeral, so he thinks he's obliged."

"Eh, Doady! but we mustn't call the master names. Didn't Mr. Linton tell us how we was to order oursel's lowly to all our betters? for 'tis in the catechism, he said."

"It's proper to be lowly to such as Mr. Linton, a gentleman that was a gentleman, and so liberal, but Mr. Jasper's got piles of money put away, and helps his neighbours as little as he can; he is a stingy skinflint, and I'll call him one."

"But he's our betters all the same, Doady," said Nat wistfully.

"And we're his neighbours," retorted David. "You just go and tell him what the catechism tells of his duty to his neighbour."

"He's raised my wages a shilling; ain't that doing his duty?"

"And he could just as easily have raised it half-a-crown and never feel it," laughed David scornfully; "why not?"

"But I'm not worth," said Nat simply, opening his large blue eyes wider and gazing wonderingly at his brother.

"No one will ever be worth, if you're not, Nat. I'd like to see the chap old Jasper'd get as cheap, so strong and all, and as honest and hard-working, and doing more than his duty, as you."

"To learn and labour truly to get mine own living, and do my duty in that state of life unto

which it shall please God to call me," said Nat, biting a large mouthful off his slice of bread and butter, munching away contentedly.

"You ought to have been born a king, lad," said David affectionately, "for you're worth it. You labour for my living as well as for your own, and I'll make it up to you yet, Nat."

"Sh—sh, Doady; as if I want. Didn't I promise mother?"

"And I've promised myself," broke in the younger brother, "ay, many and many a time, how it'll all be repaid to you, lad. When I've finished my time with Mr. Bilham, and when I've passed the examinations—some masters get a hundred a year."

"And when you're organist!" burst in Nat admiringly. He was alarmed to see David's face fall; the eager light died out of his eyes, his lips began to tremble, and letting his head fall on his arm, he began to sob pitifully.

Poor David! he had forgotten for the moment that Mr. Linton's help was gone, that there would be no more music lessons for him, and Nat's glad exclamation had brought back his loss in full force.

"Doady, Doady, lad," said Nat, rising in consternation, going over to his side, "what is it ails you? Never give way, lad!"

"I'll never be organist now, Nat," cried David, "never organist now."

"Never organist?" repeated Nat wonderingly.

"How can I learn since Mr. Linton's dead?" he answered almost peevishly; "where's the money to come from?"

Nat drew a long breath, and stared helplessly at his brother. That David would lose his lessons now that Mr. Linton was dead had never occurred to him, though David had brooded over it in silence again and again.

"Don't take on so," he whispered soothingly, "for you'll be the schoolmaster yet, and that's a grand thing!"

"Schoolmaster!" echoed David impatiently; "ay, but I'd set my heart on being organist." Alas, poor David! Kenny Froome's words came back to him: "I'd rather be Farmer Joyce's ploughman than sit in that stuffy schoolroom to whack the lads and learn them their lessons all day!" He did not love learning for its own sake, he was not fond of his books; but he was naturally a clever lad, and his own intelligence told him, as well as his master's advice, to use the talent God had given him, since men with learning got the best places in the world. His learning would help him to become a national schoolmaster, but that was not the height of his ambition. David revered no one so much as the French musician; that great man had told him he had music in his heart and in his fingers, and that talent could win him a place in the world some day, if he used it with all his might. The Frenchman was the organist of a grand church in the town, and on rare Sundays David had stolen away from his own village church to listen to the peal of that wondrous organ that made such delightful music at the command of the long, brown, supple fingers of the Frenchman. There was an organist if you like!

Some of the grand folk used to sit in church till the voluntary was over just to listen to the music, and David would hear their whispered words of praise and admiration as they passed through the church gate. To be as great a musician as this was the height of David's ambition. And he was not the first village lad who had aspired so high. Village lads before now had become great poets, great authors, great statesmen and great musicians, and why not he? He had it in his heart and in his fingers, ay, and he would be one some day.

Some days he arrived at the French musician's house before his lesson time, and had to wait till some grand lady had finished hers, and to hear the Frenchman scold her! yes, scold her! just as if she had been David himself. Her carriage and liveried servants were waiting at the door, but the musician cared no more for that than if she had been a poor village girl and had to go home on foot. Woe betide her if her pieces were not satisfactorily practised! The full tide of the Frenchman's wrath descended on her, and she would depart meekly, promising to do better next time. Here was power, David thought. A power that forced the people to stay at church to listen to his music, a power which made the high-born lady bow meekly to his wrath. Could David ever have such power—the power that knowledge could bring him?

Boys, do you ever build castles in the air? All boys do, I think. This was David's castle in the air. And he never told his dreams, not even to Nat—poor Nat—he would not understand it.

Doady a clever musician, teaching grand folk ! That David might be organist some day in the room of Matthew Evans, Nat grasped fully, and that was as much as he and the villagers and David could ever hope to expect. And when they spoke of his being organist, it always meant of their own village church.

And David let them think it. True, he would be organist of the village church some day, but that would only be a stepping-stone to something greater—in the same way that his studying for the post of national schoolmaster would be a stepping-stone to knowledge—and David had read somewhere that knowledge is power.

“Don’t cry, lad,” said poor Nat, almost crying himself, for David’s grief was very distressing ; “if you’ve set your heart on being organist, you shall, lad—I’ll work for you. There’s plenty of work in the gardens, mornings and evenings, now that the weeds grows so fast ; the planting ain’t near done yet, the cuttings and such-like, and they pay me well, never fear !”

“I wish I was more like you, Nat ; p’raps I’d be happier if I was more content,” answered David. “But that’ll never be ; you have a heart of gold, lad. And, hark ye, Nat, you shall not work harder for me ; you work enough already ; but I’m rare thankful, and some day it’ll be returned.” Another sob stopped David. It would never be returned in the royal way he had once hoped, now.

“But I will work, Doady, and I don’t want it returned. You’ll take your lessons just the same.”

"You don't understand," said David, lifting his tear-stained face. "If you was to give me all the money that skinflint gives you half a year, it wouldn't pay six months of lessons. Did you never think, lad, what Mr. Linton gave for the lessons?"

"Was it so much?" asked Nat, awed.

"He is a grand musician," said David, with quivering lips, "a regular stunner! He teaches grand folk, and his price is high. He has a right to make it high. It is in his power, 'cause so much knowledge is his. Eh, Nat, it's a grand thing—knowledge!"

"Is it cleverness, Doady?"

"It's cleverness *used*," answered David. "I might be clever, but I'd be a dunce all the same if I didn't practise it. D'ye see it, lad?"

"Ay, and you do practise it every day with the books, so you'll have knowledge," said Nat, opening his round blue eyes wider in admiration. It comforted David a little, that last sentence of Nat's. It was nice to hear somebody else say so confidently, though it was only Nat, "you'll have knowledge."

"And Doady," said Nat, pleased to see the gleam of hope in his young brother's eyes, "p'raps the new curate will help you the same as Mr. Linton, and you'll go on with the music lessons the same, and be organist after Matthew Evans."

"I can't hope like you, Nat," said David, shaking his head. "Curates aren't all as rich as Mr. Linton. Do you mind the one afore him? He was very poor; he hadn't money of his own, d'ye see. The curate of Ravenswood gets only one hundred and

twenty pounds a year allowed him, for Mr. Bilham told me."

"One hundred and twenty pounds! Eh Doady, it's a fortune, sure!"

"To lads like us it would be, and to Mary Lane, but not to a gentleman as must live like a gentleman. 'Tis as hard, lad, for the curate of Ravenswood to live on his money almost as it is for us to live on ours, and likely as not our next curate will be no better off than the one afore Mr. Linton. But there, Nat, you'll be late if I keep you talking; you'd better be off, or old skinflint will come down on you, and maybe keep you from 'tending the funeral to-morrow."

"He's not particular to a minute at tea-time," said Nat, in defence of Mr. Jasper, "work gets slack during evenings;" but he swallowed down the remainder of his tea, and snatching his cap off a chair bounded out of the cottage and ran down the lane as fast as his legs could carry him, for it was late. David's tardy home-coming and the long talk had made it later than usual.

David washed up the tea things as easily and quickly as a girl, and settled the cups and saucers in their usual places on the little dresser, for you see they had no women folk about to do these things for them. True, Mary Lane the dress-maker, in the little cottage a stone's-throw from their own, mended their clothes and socks, and came in, once a week at least, to give the cottage a thorough good scrubbing out, and Nat in return dug and planted her little strip of garden, and

kept it tidy throughout the year, and often carried a pail of water from the pump at the end of the lane. But Mary Lane said she would have done it just the same if there had been no Nat to do up her garden, for she owed their mother more than that.

Mrs. Barnes had been a dressmaker too, and had taught Mary dressmaking without taking a premium, for in those days Mary was a poor orphan girl in service, but she was not strong enough for house-work, and had a great taste for dressmaking, and Mrs. Barnes had made her an apprentice without charging anything for it. Now, Mary was a successful dressmaker, and had as much work as and more than she could do, for she took great pains, and fitted so well, and had apprentices of her own under her. But she never forgot that Mrs. Barnes had helped her in her distress, and now that the two lads were left motherless, did many little things for them that only women can do, proving she had a grateful, thankful heart.

David then opened his satchel of books that Kenny Froome had pitied him so for being obliged to study, and, placing his elbows on the table with his head between his hands, prepared the lessons that Mr. Bilham had set him. He had no time to waste, for at eight o'clock he had to go to the schoolmaster's lodgings and study with him till nine o'clock — no wonder Kenny Froome pitied him!

The lads could not remember their father—he died when David was a baby—but their mother had

been so good, and worked so hard for them, that they never missed him. She was a dressmaker, as I said before, and when her husband died she set about her dressmaking with a brave heart, and brought up her two lads well.

The little cottage had been built by her husband, so it was her own now, and it was a great boon to have no rent to pay. There was the little front kitchen in the middle, on the right a little bedroom, on the left the back kitchen, that was all—just three little rooms, but she made it enough for them. David was her favourite. She loved him for his quickness and cleverness; he was the baby too, and the babies are often spoiled. “Nat was a good lad, an affectionate lad,” she would say, “but he will never make anything of himself,” and then she would sigh. From a little fellow of three his round blue eyes had looked up at her questioningly in that slow way; he was slow to walk, slow to talk, slow to take in things that other folk understood directly. “There’s something wanting in him,” she said.

So all her hopes were centred on David. When he was only eight or nine, but so sharp at his books, she had spoken to the vicar about his becoming a pupil-teacher when he was old enough, and David had taken to the idea. But the mother died soon after, and her last words to Nat were, “Take care of David; I leave him in your charge.” And Nat had promised, with those great blue eyes full of tears. Yes, she could trust him to Nat, though he was “wanting somewhere.”

And good, brave Nat, how had he fulfilled his

charge? Ask any of the villagers, and they will tell you how he got the place as errand boy at Mr. Jasper's shop—he was just old enough to leave school—how he worked for David to keep him at school, what a handy lad he was for looking after a person's garden, and how by degrees he got enough work in a dozen or more gardens, in which he worked early in the morning till eight o'clock, when he was expected at Mr. Jasper's, and till late in the evenings after half-past seven all through the long summer days!

And yet they dared to call him *silly* Nat!—the choristers, his fellow-workers at the shop, and Jessie Froome at the stationer's. Nat was like the story of the toad which every one abused and laughed at, though they knew not that it carried a precious jewel in its head. Nat had a jewel in his head—a precious jewel which some of them had lost: it was doing his duty to God and to his neighbour.

It was past nine when David came home; he put his hand to his head as if it ached, and looked heavy-eyed and despairing. Poor David! His castle in the air had come tumbling about his ears, and as we know how much the loss of the music lessons meant to him, we may indeed pity him.

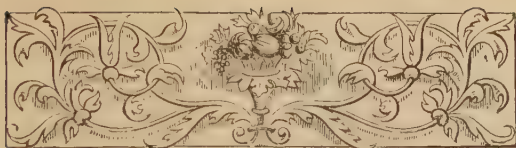
Nat had lighted the little lamp, for he generally got home about a quarter to nine. Both lads were weary with their hard day's work—Nat with his hands, and David with his brains. It was their habit to prepare for rest as soon as they came home. Nat took down the Bible and the Prayer-book from

the shelf—his mother had done it every evening when she was with them, and Nat followed implicitly his mother's ways. Nat saw his brother's desponding face and guessed the cause, so he chose for their reading part of the thirty-seventh Psalm to comfort him. "Trust in the Lord, and do good ; so shalt thou dwell in the land, and verily thou shalt be fed. Delight thyself also in the Lord : and He shall give thee the desires of thine heart. Commit thy way unto the Lord ; trust also in Him, and He shall bring it to pass . . . Rest in the Lord, and wait patiently for Him."

The beautiful words comforted Nat. He knelt down and read aloud the collect for the week. And David—they would have comforted David too, if he had heard them, but he had not ; his thoughts were with the lost music lessons ; he had not heard them, so had missed their comfort.

Then Nat carried the lamp into the little bedroom which both lads shared, and before long they were in the land of dreams.





CHAPTER IV.

SAMBO.

NAT was up with the lark next morning. There was the little onion bed to weed, and he would like to give it ten minutes before setting off for the vicarage garden, where he had quite a week of mornings' work before him.

"Hillo! 'ere's an early bird for you! Have you been breakfasting off them worms? There's a fine lot of fat ones in that bed, I'll bet!"

The voice came over the garden wall, where the owner's black, shaggy head appeared, with a dirty face, and curious, black, evil-looking eyes.

"For the matter of that, you're another early bird," retorted Nat good-naturedly. "Come along, Sambo, and help me with the weeds; you're only idling; ten minutes will clear this bed of them."

"Not I," answered Sambo, grinning over the wall, and disclosing a set of white teeth, which looked whiter under his black hair and dirty face. "I likes idling, and what's more, I'll never work as long as I can help it. I leaves such to you and David. How's 'is r'yal 'ighness this morning?"

"Doady's at his books," said Nat, jerking his head in the direction of the kitchen.

"A pair of early birds," laughed Sambo over the wall. "'Ave you carried him in a spade of worms for his breakfast, too?"

"He's had a better breakfast than that," answered Nat simply. "Say, Sambo, you'll be coming to eat off worms if you never work."

"My eye! you air a clever chap; who'd a thought of silly Nat making such a speech. You'll beat 'is r'yal 'ighness and the schoolmaster together!" Sambo leered over the wall and puckered up his face into an ugly grin. He might have been a good-looking lad if his hair had been cut, and his face washed, and his clothes tidy; but his hair hung matted over his brow and ears, and his face was never by any chance clean, and his clothes hung on him in rags, patched with mud and dirt; and those bright black eyes looked sly, ready to wink at anything that was not strictly honest or upright.

Sambo was the black sheep of Ravenswood. When his father was living he was a bad enough boy, but now—the villagers shook their heads and said they did not know what Sambo was coming to. He played truant at least three times in the week; on some occasions he was known to stay a whole week from school.

"A regular little ruffian," Mary Lane muttered to herself, as she opened her windows to let in the fresh morning air, and spied Sambo leaning over the Barnes's garden wall.

And he did look like it. A sturdy, stout, little fellow he was, with his brown fists buried in his tattered trousers pockets, and his cap pressed low over his forehead, with the jagged ends of coarse black hair hanging under it. But even ruffianly Sambo, like the story of the frog, had a jewel hidden in him—the beautiful gift of song. That coarse, heavy-looking mouth, from which ugly words and wicked words fell so glibly, could open now, if he wished it, and burst into beautiful melody, and warble out a chant or hymn equal to Martin himself, who was the leading choir boy.

Mr. Linton had found him out. He had heard him singing in the church, and had taken him in hand. He gave him a new suit of clothes, and Sambo stood one morning transformed, with a clean head and face peeping out of a snowy surplice, in the choir stalls, singing with the rest.

But the cleanliness lasted only a month or so; Sambo grew dirtier and dirtier, till the other lads complained and refused to sit near him. No amount of coaxing or threatening from Mr. Linton could induce the boy to change his dirty habits, and in despair the poor curate had to dismiss him.

Sambo's mother had been a gipsy girl, but passing through Ravenswood, and staying there a couple of days till the fair was over, she fell in with a stalwart collier who asked her to marry him. So she gave up her wandering life for his sake, and settled in Ravenswood.

She was such a tiny woman, little bigger than a dwarf, with a brown face and beady black eyes, and

a quantity of coarse black hair. Sambo was like her, not a bit like his father, but his wickedness was inherited, I am afraid, from his mother's brother, who was known among the gipsies as "Ruffian Rob," not from her, for she was a good little soul—rather dirty in her habits and in her house—poor little gipsy woman. She had not had good training or example, perhaps, but she attended church regularly, and was a good wife and mother; but now Sambo had got quite beyond her.

When Sambo would not go to school, and reports of truant-playing reached his father's ears, that big collier used to thrash him with his belt, but thrashings only made Sambo harder. Now his father was dead more than a year, and Sambo attended day school, and Sunday school, and church at his pleasure, earned a sixpence now and then by carrying water, or gathering road scrapings for a gentleman's garden when he was in the humour, or dug up a basket of sweet little ferns which he found in the woods, and hawked them about for sale, but only when he felt inclined.

"You're a bad, wicked boy, Sambo," the poor little gipsy woman would say with tears in her eyes; "I dunno what hever will become of you."

"I'll go along of Ruffian Rob fust time he comes down here again," Sambo would answer, and that threat would keep the poor little thing silent, for she loved dirty, wicked Sambo, and could not bear the thought of parting with him.

Nat was the sweetest-tempered lad at Ravenswood. He took no notice of Sambo's insulting

words, but went on weeding quietly. "Ain't you going to school, Sambo, to-day?" he asked presently.

"Ho! yes, I'm going," replied Sambo, screwing up his left eye into a knowing wink, and he meant it as a sarcastic kind of way of saying he meant to do the reverse. "Ho! yes, I'm going—I'm thinking to be pupil-teacher. Dessay I'll come out afore David—Mister Barnes, I meanter say—in the zamination."

Nat lifted his big blue eyes off the onion bed and stared for one moment at Sambo, but the shock head, and dirty face, and knowing wink, was such a contrast to his last glimpse of David's intelligent face and neat appearance, that the idea tickled Nat, and he laughed long and loud.

"I dessay," he repeated, when he could manage to speak, and seeing the little joke. "When be you going for the zamination, Sambo?"

"My eye!" exclaimed Sambo in a voice of admiration and surprise, for the Ravenswood folk said that Nat Barnes never saw a joke, and that any one could fool him. "Wot's come over you to-day? The morning hair 'as gone inter your 'cad and lugged the cobwebs out!"

Poor Nat didn't see all the drift of this speech, but bending over the onions again, he said, "I'd go to school if I was you, Sambo, to-day."

"And why for to-day? Come, tell me, clever Nat."

Nat left his weeding and went close up to him on the other side of the wall and said in an awed hushed tone—

“ ‘Cause he may be looking down on you and axing God to make you go—p'raps he's sorry you won't.”

“ Who ? ” asked Sambo, recoiling a little, and in some fear, for Nat's voice was so awed and his face so earnest.

“ Mr. Linton,” whispered Nat. “ He's in Paradise, you know, and his sister told the lads as his spirit were near us helping us to be good p'raps.”

Sambo was superstitious ; he was afraid of spirits, and believed in ghosts. He looked fearfully round him, and down the lane, and cautiously up to the skies ; but the broad daylight, and Nat's presence, and Mary Lane shaking her mats at the door, reassured him, and angry at the sudden fear he had been made to feel, he cried roughly—

“ You're a silly fool—get along with you ! What next will you be stuffed with ? ”

“ It's not stuff, Sambo, it's true, quite true. Don't you b'lieve he's in Paradise—him so good and all ? ”

“ Wal, did I say he warn't ? ”

At this moment David came out of the door with his satchel of books thrown across his shoulder. He had just eaten his breakfast ; he always breakfasted alone, for Nat took his at the shop, though he was careful to provide something besides just bread and butter for David's breakfast, for, as he said *he* had plenty of good things at the shop, so Nat generally had a few radishes to offer, or a crisp lettuce, and sometimes a piece of a herring.

“ Hillo,” cried Sambo, glad to change the conversation. “ 'Ere's the schoolmaster ! Morning,

Mister Barnes," he said, pulling a matted bit of hair on his forehead in mock deference. "I 'ope I see you well."

"I'm glad you've washed yourself this morning," retorted David ironically; "how clean you look!"

"So do you, Mister Barnes, and plump too—I 'spects it's Nat's worms you fattens on. I hears he digs you up a spade of 'em every mornin' early."

"There, don't come so close to me, please," said David, giving him a push, "or I'll be having some worms of a different sort on me that don't come out of Nat's garden. Say, Nat, isn't it time for you to be at the vicar's flower-beds?" and David walked on, for he was due at Mr. Bilham's for an hour's study before school.

Sambo doubled up his fists and shook them after David; he hesitated for a moment as to whether he would have a fight there and then, but David had a champion too close at hand, and as Sambo was a great bully, and all bullies being cowards, he thought better of it, and vented his wrath in words.

"A skinny, bony schoolmaster! I could knock him over with this 'ere fist with one blow, with all his larning!"

"I dessay," answered Nat gravely; "so could I knock you over with one blow, so you'd better not lay your fist on Doady. Stop a bit, Sambo, I'm coming to the vicarage, and I'll walk with you."

"Oh! you will, will you? P'raps I won't walk with you, Mister Schoolmaster's-brother. I'm too proud."

"Don't you take on, Sambo. Doady didn't mean

nothing; the lessons crosses him sometimes," said Nat anxiously, shouldering his spade and joining Sambo out of the wicket gate. "Say, Sambo, you'll go to school this morning, won't you now?"

"To have David down on me, and telling tales to Bilham?"

"David never tells tales; and if he's down on you, maybe it's because you won't never learn."

"And I don't want to learn. I'm going with Ruffian Rob when he comes down. He can't read nor write, and he don't want to."

"There won't be no school this afternoon. The lads are all going to the funeral, and Mr. Jasper's given me leave to go. He were very good to you, Sambo; he were good to all of us."

"That he was; I've no complaint agin him."

"And he was always after you to get you to school. Maybe he wants you to go now," poor Nat pleaded.

"None of that now," said Sambo gruffly, but it was only a little choking in his throat that made him speak like that. The dead curate's influence had extended to him too—he could not forget him so soon. "He were good to me, but he's dead and gone; don't stuff me with your spirits—I'm off." And Sambo thrust his hands into his tattered trousers pockets and went away whistling.

But his heart was touched. The memory of those kind eyes followed him. He felt again the touch of those hands on his shoulders, that did not seem to shrink from touching him; that kind voice was in his ears, saying over and over again, "Sambo, my

lad, why don't you *try* to be good?" He did not go to school as Nat had suggested, and that was the first thing Nat asked David about when he came home, and seemed disappointed to hear that he had not; but in the afternoon, when the church was crowded almost to overflowing, and that solemn procession entered the churchyard, and the vicar's voice fell on their ears—"I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live; and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die"—Sambo crept into the church to pay his last tribute to the dead.

It was a solemn service—there was scarcely a dry eye in the church, even the grown-up lads sniffled and rubbed their coat sleeves over their eyes. The choristers chanted the Psalms, led by Martin in a quavering treble. David held his book before his face, heavy-eyed and listless. Little Bertie's gaze wandered awestruck from the coffin to the bowed figure in mourning—the sorrowing sister of the dead man. Only Nat's eyes were uplifted—those big, childish blue eyes—they were trying to follow the spirit that had flown to Paradise. The little gipsy woman was there, weeping as if her heart would break—she alone knew how much the dead had been to her—had he not tried to reclaim her Sambo? Then the sad procession filed out of church, and Sambo, too, passed his ragged sleeve across his eyes.

It was all over. While he lay sleeping so calmly in his own familiar room, the parishioners felt they owned him still—they could speak of him in hushed

voices as they passed the house, and point to the darkened chamber—but now—the sun shone into the empty room, the blinds were up again, and the grave was closed. A shadow of great mourning fell that evening over Ravenswood.





CHAPTER V.

THE NEW CURATE.

YOU do not look very strong, Mr. Andrews ; I am afraid you are not," said the vicar's wife, as she handed a cup of afternoon tea to the new curate in her cosy little drawing-room. The vicar had just brought him in and presented him, and almost immediately he had been called out to visit a sick parishioner, so Mrs. Reynold and the new curate were left to get friendly by themselves.

"I am stronger than I look, and I can bear a great deal—much more than you think," said Mr. Andrews, with a pleasant laugh. It was a catching sort of laugh. Mrs. Reynold laughed too, though she scarcely knew why she did.

He was a short spare man, pale faced and fragile looking, with large hollow, blue eyes, and a short golden beard. The fair hair fell away from his temples and his brow, making him very bald for a young man.

"It is a big straggling parish—the curate is

hard-worked, I can assure you ; the vicar, you see, is getting old," said Mrs. Reynold.

"I am prepared for hard work," said Mr. Andrews ; "in fact I like hard work," and he laughed again. "Your late curate was much beloved, I hear."

"Very much so; he was a great loss, Mr. Andrews. He won the people's hearts in no time. He was very rich—I sometimes thought he spent his money too lavishly. The poor adored him, but I am sure it was as much for himself as for his money."

"I hope they will like me—I have no private income," he said, looking thoughtfully out of the window ; "I depend entirely on my curacy, you know."

"I am sure you will be a favourite," she said, smiling ; "you look as if you could make friends easily."

"I intend to make them like me," he answered, with a grateful smile. "What a fine manly face !" he exclaimed, as his glance fell on a framed photo on a little table close at hand.

"That is Mr. Linton's photograph," she said, handing it to him. "He was a remarkably handsome man !"

Mr. Andrews looked at it long and earnestly, and perhaps his heart failed just a little. It was not an easy matter to step into the place of such a handsome, winning man as the late curate looked, and one that had so much money at his command.

The vicar came in just then, and the talk flowed on pleasantly for another half hour.

"Our choir practices are generally held on Fridays,"

the vicar said. "As I told you before, all such work must fall on your shoulders, as I do not understand music. Mr. Linton was about to teach them another anthem, quite a new one—I don't think they have seen it yet. Would you like them to begin it this evening?"

"Certainly; will you let me look at it, if you have it here? I must write to my mother before service, so I shall say good-evening, Mrs. Reynold."

"I like him very much," said Mrs. Reynold when the door had closed on him. "He is very young and rather delicate, I am afraid, but he looks so determined; and do you know, George, there is something so commanding in his presence, though he is so fragile looking."

And Mr. Andrews went home to write to his mother, the only relation he had in the world.

"I cannot help wishing the last curate had not been so handsome nor so rich," he wrote, "but that is cowardly of me. Dear mother, remember me in your prayers, and ask God to bless my efforts."

Mr. Andrews walked up the hill to church that evening, quite half an hour before the time; he wanted to take a good look round. It was a beautiful little church, covered all over with ivy, and the church clock striking the hour sounded pleasantly over the peaceful village. He was not going to take part in the service to-day, so he seated himself in one of the first pews amongst the congregation, and eagerly waited for his first glimpse of his new choristers. He had not long to wait. The bell stopped pealing; Matthew Evans began a low

soft voluntary, the vestry door opened, and Kenny Froome and little Bertie headed the procession.

He had an eagle eye—this pale young curate, and he read their faces as he might have read a book. He had a strange faculty for reading people's characters in their faces, and his first glance pleased him much. The soil was good, he thought, in which the lads' souls grew, watered and planted most likely by the last curate, whose handsome, noble face seemed always before his eyes; but weeds were growing apace too, weeds that he must help to pluck out. Before the service was over he had found out some of the worst weeds that grew in some of the lads' hearts.

Martin—Martin had a voice like a bird—what fresh sweet notes he trilled out quite unconsciously! There was no conceit in him. He sang as if it were his duty to sing the best and be the leader of the choir, as if it were a very natural thing. He was the tallest lad amongst them, with an open, honest face; but his weed was weakness to resist evil; he could be easily led; he was careless and forgetful oftentimes when in the house of God. Once he winked at somebody in the church, and Mr. Andrews had seen him.

And Kenny? Kenny had marched into church with his head thrown up, and conceit written on his face, singing with his face toward the congregation, as if calling their attention to his singing; yet his notes had neither the strength nor the sweetness of Martin's.

Little Bertie popped a sweet into his mouth

every time he thought no one was looking, nearly all the service through. Mr. Andrews thought greediness was the ugliest of his weeds.

David's face was vexed and troubled, and the frown came and went very fast on his brows. The new curate wondered if discontent was one of his weeds.

He was curious about Nat, with his short sturdy broad-shouldered figure and the childish innocent face—he thought he would like to know more about Nat. Nat's voice was the best after Martin's. He sang only from ear, for he did not know a note of music.

If Mr. Andrews was anxious to know something of the choristers, you may be sure the choristers were very anxious to see him.

“Did you see him in the first pew? My! ain't he a weak looking little chap! The fellows will never listen to him after Mr. Linton! I s'pose he couldn't hold a bat to save his life!”

Such were the whispered comments hurriedly said in the corners of the vestry, as they changed their surplices for the after practice.

They would have liked to run out there and then to hold a long consultation about the new curate, but they had to restrain their impatience till the practice was over.

“Mr. Evans tells me the hymns for next Sunday are familiar to you all,” said the new curate, standing between the choir-stalls in his cassock, with a short cane in his hand to beat time. He glanced round at every man and boy in the choir with the

pleasant smile that Mrs. Reynold had found so catching. "We shall not go through any of the hymns, then, as I should like to get on with our new anthem. Play the first few bars, Mr. Evans, please."

He was very short certainly, and fragile looking, but there was great dignity in his bearing. He had a commanding voice, and spoke with authority; the lads felt in a moment that he was as much their master as ever Mr. Linton had been. Then he sang the first part of the anthem, beating time with his cane.

"Now stand up and try that, please."

Each lad followed the beat of that cane; each lad tried his best to please him; each lad felt he would like to have a friend in the new curate.

The practice was over at last, and the boys' tongues were loosened as they crowded out of the vestry.

"He ain't a bit like Mr. Linton!"

"I can tell you, lads, he ain't so easy-going!"

"Ain't his eyes just deep? Seemed to me as if he knew what I was thinking about when I was going to give Martin a dig."

"And you didn't dig me neither, Kenny Froome," laughed Martin. "Ye'll have some one to keep you in order, lad."

"I wonder if he'll give us tips like Mr. Linton," said little Bertie, putting his last sweet into his mouth, "I had no end of goodies last year from his pennies."

"You're a greedy-gut, you are; you think of nothing but stuffing," said Martin contemptuously.

"I ain't no more than any one else," said Bertie, reddening. "You eat 'em fast enough when you can get 'em."

"Well, you won't be able to eat 'em so fast yourself, 'cause you won't get 'em so often," retorted Martin. "Mr. Andrews hasn't got pennies to throw away like Mr. Linton."

"That he hasn't," chimed in Kenny. "Where d'you think he lives, lads?—why, in Mrs. Gunter's lodgings. Mother says they're dirt cheap, and she's sure he's only got what he earns; not like Mr. Linton, who had his money in the bank, and lived in a house all to himself with a housekeeper. Mother says Ravenswood will go down now with a poor curate. None of us'll have tips any more, I'm thinking; and as for David Barnes—say, David, d'you think Mr. Andrews'll pay for your music lessons?"

"Stop your clatter; I'm sick of it," cried David. "You've a tongue as long as my arm, and my music lessons are my business, not yours, Kenny Froome."

"But it's true, David, it's true!" cried more than one lad. "What will you do 'bout the lessons now?"

"Nothing," retorted David fiercely; and he strode away ahead of them with his lip quivering, and the burning tears struggling in his eyes.

"Crosspatch David!" and "Scowly David!" and "High and mighty David," they called out after him, little thinking how much the lost lessons meant to the poor ambitious boy.

"Don't tease him, lads," said Nat imploringly.

"He's so took on about them lessons, you don't know. Leave him alone, I say."

"It is a shame," admitted Martin frankly. "David'll lose more than us, and Bertie—I forgot him—he'll want his goodies, won't you, greedy-gut?"

"You shut up," retorted Bertie angrily. "I'd pitch into you if you warn't so big."

The boys with Martin burst into a laugh. Little Bertie was a small pink-and-white faced, pretty little boy—the idea of his pitching into Martin, the tallest lad, with the longest arms and legs, was perfectly ludicrous to them.

"Well said, little 'un! Go it, and I'll help yer. I'm ready for a fight any time o' day," said a voice breaking in upon their laughter; and Sambo suddenly appeared amongst them, tucking up his tattered sleeves, and grinning from ear to ear. "Now then, little chap, are you going to begin?"

"Why, here's Sambo," cried a chorus. "Why Sambo, whatever have you been a-doing to yourself? Your face ain't quite so coffee-coloured."

"I'm going visitin'," answered Sambo, still tucking up his sleeves, quite unmoved at their taunt. "Now then, Bertie, air you going to begin?"

"Two to one ain't fair," said Bertie, backing as Sambo edged closer to him. "I'll ask your help when I want it, Sambo, thank you all the same."

"Ain't no one going to fight then? Come on, any lad of my size."

"No one wants to fight, so you can cover up

your dirty arms again, Sambo; if I was you I wouldn't be so proud of them," said Martin. "No one wants to fight, coming out of church and all, so shut up!"

"Say, Sambo, where are you going visiting?" cried the others, gathering round him.

"Guess," said Sambo, with another grin.

"Ruffian Rob," said Kenny.

"Mr. Jarvis of 'The Three Feathers,'" said Martin.

"Pooh!" said Sambo, with a gesture of contempt, "it's none of them. It's gentry."

"Gentry!" cried the boys in a chorus. "Oh, yes! we believe you!"

"You'll see," said he with a delighted grin, "it's a lady!" he added triumphantly. "And what's more, she sent round for me to visit her. Time's up—I dessay she's waiting and looking out for me; come and see if it's true," and Sambo elbowed his way through them and started down the hill at a fast trot.

The lads were curious—all lads are, I think—so they followed him pretty closely.

"He's only humbugging us, lads," said one, "but let's run him down."

On went Sambo, turning a delighted, grinning face backwards every minute, and on followed the choristers past the little cottages with their tiny flower-gardens. They were the same gardens they had rushed past so gaily more than a week ago, as they raced down the hill forgetting for a moment that the curate lay dead. Sambo stopped at the same green gate, boldly lifted the latch, and marched

up to the white house that had been Mr. Linton's, and boldly rang the bell at the big front door.

He put out his tongue at the choristers staring wonderingly through the gate, and made a horrible grimace just as the door was opened by Mrs. Mills the housekeeper.

"I've come to see Miss Linton," said Sambo, in a voice loud enough to reach the boys.

"She is expecting you," answered Mrs. Mills. "Come in, but wipe your shoes well first."

Sambo turned his face to the gate and began scraping his shoes carefully, then, with a triumphant leer at the lads, went inside, and the door was shut on him.

"Well, I never," said Kenny Froome; "what can Miss Linton want with dirty Sambo?"

"I thought she left soon after the funeral," said Martin.

"Where's Nat? He did up the garden a little while ago. He'll tell us when she's going?"

But Nat was not amongst them; he had slipped away after David, when Sambo came on the scene. Nat's hours and minutes were too precious to be idled away uselessly.

Meanwhile Sambo followed Mrs. Mills, who kept a good distance from him; but he was used to such slights, and was quite hardened to them. She opened the door of a bright, pretty sitting-room. Sambo remembered having seen it once before, a long time ago, when he had been taken into the choir by Mr. Linton, and had tried to be good. Miss Linton was sitting there alone in her rich

black dress, and smiled as Mrs. Mills said, "Here's the boy, ma'am."

The truth of the case was that Miss Linton had very much admired some oak ferns that grew in the shade in her brother's garden. She did not like to remove anything that his dear hands had planted, and Mrs. Mills had told her that Mr. Linton had put them there himself.

"They are rare pretty things," said Mrs. Mills. "I've known strangers and visitors put a high price on them, for all they grow wild in the woods round Ravenswood."

"Do they really grow wild?" Miss Linton asked. "I can scarcely believe it. They are as fine and as beautiful as the maidenhair fern!"

"I dare say, ma'am; yet they are to be found wild in one or two places, though it is not every one who knows where the spots just are."

"And did my dear brother find these himself?"

"Oh no, ma'am, 'twas Sambo Finch that got them for him. He knows every cranny in them woods."

"And is Sambo one of the choristers?"

"La! no, ma'am. You wouldn't ask such a question if you could get a sight of him. He's a dirty vagrant, he is—the little gipsy woman's son. Don't you mind asking me who she was one day? The same that cried so bitter at the—the funeral, ma'am," said Mrs. Mills, putting her apron up to her eyes.

"Ah, yes! I do remember her—a little brown-faced creature with beady black eyes—she must

have a tender heart, Mrs. Mills. I should like to help her son to repay her a little for the tears she shed. Would Sambo bring me some ferns? I should like to ask him myself, if you can get him here."

"Sambo's a slippery eel to get at, a good-for-nothing vagrant, but I'll have him here to-morrow evening, ma'am, as sure as my name is Sairey Mills."

Mrs. Mills was as good as her word. She had walked up to the little gipsy woman's cottage in the nick of time, for Sambo was seldom to be found even there; but she was in luck this time, for Sambo was sitting on the door-step, munching a piece of coarse brown bread.

Mrs. Mills had given her message, and Sambo had agreed to come. "Miss Linton will pay you well, Sambo, so if I was you I'd look sharp to-morrow, if you want to spend your time a little profitable like."

Sambo had looked sharp, as we have seen; indeed he had made a pretence of washing his face. He stood at the door where Mrs. Mills left him with his cap in one hand, the other tugging at a coarse lock of hair on his forehead by way of greeting, and an expectant grin on his face. Miss Linton understood now Mrs. Mill's shocked exclamation when she asked if Sambo was in the choir. He looked, as she said he was, a gipsy vagrant.

"Good evening, Sambo," she said pleasantly, and her voice startled him, it was so like the dead curate's. He could not take his eyes off hers either, they were so like Mr. Linton's. Sambo remembered with an

uncomfortable thrill Nat Barnes's saying about Mr. Linton's spirit. This was no spirit, however, but real flesh and blood. As Sambo still gazed he grew quite fascinated; he had never seen any one so beautiful to look at as the tall, stately sister of the dead curate in her mourning dress. The impudent grin left his face, and he became abashed and somewhat awed.

"Did Mrs. Mills tell you why I wanted you?" she asked.

"Ay, 'bout the hoak ferns."

"And how is it that you know where all these delightful secret places are, my lad?"

"Lor' bless you, ma'am, I knows every inch of them woods," said Sambo proudly. "It's a free life in the woods, it is—it suits me no end. I wish I was a tree, or a fern, or sommut. There's no one hanging after 'em, an' preaching an' scolding."

"Nay, Sambo, you are made something nobler than that—a child of God and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven."

"Don't care about that," said Sambo. "The trees will live longer'n men; why, they was that height afore you was born yourself, and will be stout and strong when you are dead and buried."

"True, Sambo; but when they die they perish, they have no after life—no Paradise where *he* is gone. You knew Mr. Linton, Sambo?"

"He wor very good to me; I guess I hain't forgot."

"Everybody loved him," she said with kindling eyes, "everybody remembers him with gratitude,

and blesses his name; many will strive to live better lives for his teaching and his sake. Would you not rather be a human being like that than a poor, senseless tree?"

"Oh! if I was good," said Sambo, "I would. But I ain't good—I'm very bad. I has no one to love me; every one is agin me. I'd rather be a tree."

"No one to love you? Oh! think, Sambo, think. Have you not a mother?"

"Ay," answered he, just a little moved, "but she says I'm the plague of her life."

"Perhaps you are, Sambo," she said gently. "Perhaps you weary and torment her now that you are big, forgetting what care she took of you when you were little and helpless. Is it so, my poor boy?"

"I dessay. I guess you're right—I'm a real bad 'un, I am. I never carries her pails of water, nor nothing."

"Wouldn't you like to help her a little? wouldn't you like to earn money for her when you can? You can earn some money now if you like, and help her too."

"'Bout the hoak ferns?" asked Sambo.

"Yes; come and see how beautifully those have grown that you brought my brother long ago!"

"They're fine," nodded Sambo. "I knows a little rocky place where they're chock full. I could bring you a dozen roots easy."

"Mrs. Mills tells me that their roots are long and straggling, and it requires care to pull them up to enable them to take root again."

"She's about right too. Bless you, ma'am, *I* know how to pull 'em up."

"I am sure you do, for these could not have grown better; and, Sambo, I shall give you half-a-crown for your trouble."

"My eye," ejaculated Sambo, with a broad grin, and pulling a lock of hair on his brow, he added, "An' thank you kindly, ma'am."

"I shall give it you to use as you like, but oh! Sambo, don't think only of yourself, think of others; think of your mother, and try to be good."

"Hall right," he said, "I'll try. When will you want 'em?"

"To-morrow if possible. I shall leave Ravenswood the day after."

"You'll have 'em then," and Sambo touched his tattered cap and went out of the gate.

It was almost dusk. The long summer evenings were at their best now. Sambo walked leisurely down the road with a light heart. He had never had the opportunity of earning half-a-crown before. He called Miss Linton "a first-rater," and dwelt pleasantly on her beauty and stateliness. "I guess she's as good as him," he said to himself, "and he wor a right down good 'un."

In the fulness of his heart he began to sing. The roads were quiet and deserted—a knot of men at the corners here and there, a woman hurrying home from her day's charring, or dressmaking, or washing—that was all. Ravenswood was a very sleepy little place. Sambo sang louder and louder; now he burst into a beautiful anthem that he had learned

during his short stay in the choir—soft and low, loud and strong, rich and true were Sambo's notes. It is a wonderful gift, the gift of song!

"Well done, my little man," said an admiring voice, and a hand was laid on Sambo's shoulder. "You ought to be in the choir; perhaps you are—I hope you are, though I don't remember seeing you there this evening."

"I've bin in the choir," said Sambo proudly, lifting his eyes to the stranger's face.

"But not now? How is that?" asked Mr. Andrews, for it was he.

"I dunno. Be you the new curate?"

"Yes," laughed Mr. Andrews; "so as we shall have to see a good deal of each other, you had better tell me your name."

"I'm Sambo Finch. You just ask any one for my character; they all knows me," he added, with a leer.

"A good one, I hope, Sambo," said the new curate; and the deep eyes, that Kenny Froome said seemed to be looking through him, searched Sambo now.

"Wall, as good as most," he said impudently. "Good-bye, mister, my way is down this lane, where I'm wanted perticular," and Sambo slipped off like the slippery eel he was.

"Poor lad," said the curate, "I must look after him. What a wonderful gift of song!" And with another lingering glance after Sambo's retreating figure, Mr. Andrews went home to his somewhat dingy lodgings at Mrs. Gunter's.



CHAPTER VI.

MR. ANDREWS COMFORTS DAVID.

NAT was up betimes as usual, weeding and cleaning his little plot of ground before he started to work in the vicarage garden. He was not feeling cheerful this morning. David had gone to bed depressed ; he had got up depressed, and was sitting in the kitchen poring over his books with a sullen, troubled face, having eaten a very meagre breakfast. If he had ever hoped that the new curate would help him as Mr. Linton had done, that hope was now dashed to the ground. Did not Kenny Froome say he lodged at Mrs. Gunter's, and that his fortune consisted only of what he earned ?

“And to-day is my lesson day, or would be if he were here to pay for it. Will the master look for me, I wonder ?” Poor David could not fix his mind on the books before him, and his thoughts wandered to the Frenchman's music-room, with all the familiar bits of furniture, and the grand piano that his fingers had touched so reverently. Mr. Linton had always paid for the quarter's lessons in advance,

and the quarter happened to be up the day before the curate's death.

"I'm glad 'twas paid in advance," poor David thought. "I'm glad I owe the master nothing. I'm glad there's no need to tell him I can't come again. I'll just slip out of his memory; maybe he'll wonder for a day or two, and then forget. He's got his money all right, and he'll think that was all the lessons I wanted. Will he be disappointed? No, no; why should he be?" The great master had greater things to think of than poor David, yet he had said David might be great himself some day. But not now, not now! and the lad laid his head on the table and wept.

"Cheer up, Doady; never give way, lad!"

It was Nat standing in the doorway, his own honest eyes full of tears.

"Ay, Nat," returned David, lifting his troubled face, "don't fret for me; 'tis the last time, 'tis the lesson to-day, ye know. I was thinking if the master would miss me. I'll be more used to it by and by. Get back to your work, lad, 'tis time I was off too."

Nat shouldered his spade and turned away reluctantly; he had not reached the gate when a gay voice bade him "Good morning."

Nat touched his cap, and returned "Good morning" shyly. The gay voice belonged to Mr. Andrews, the new curate.

"Isn't this one of my choir boys?" he asked.

"Yes, if you please, sir."

"I thought I saw your face in the choir last evening. What is your name, my lad?"

"Nathaniel Barnes, sir."

"Nathaniel? Nathaniel, in whom there was no guile." The last words were said more to himself, but Nat heard them, and said simply—

"Yes, if you please, sir."

It was a very appropriate name, the curate thought. There was no guile in the innocent child-like eyes looking straight into his, with the traces of newly-shed tears.

"You go to work early," said Mr. Andrews.

"Yes," said Nat, thinking that the curate went out walking early. "I always work an hour when I can outside, afore I go to the shop."

"Then you are gardener as well as shop-boy," he said with a smile.

"I'm errand boy at Mr. Jasper's," said Nat proudly, "and I looks after the folks' gardens as well."

"Then you have no time to lose, and I'll walk your way. I have been looking about me this morning, Nathaniel; like you I think it a pity to lie abed on a lovely summer morning such as this. It's a pretty village and a beautiful country; you ought to be proud of Ravenswood."

"We are," said Nat. "We was born here—David and me—and that's our cottage."

"And how many more are there besides David and you?"

"None, sir; there's only David and me, and we take care of each other."

"And love each other dearly, I know."

"Ay, sir," and the tears struggled once more in Nat's eyes as he remembered his love could not procure the thing nearest to David's heart.

"But there's been trouble this morning," said Mr. Andrews, whose quick eyes had detected the tears from the first, and had hoped to sympathise if he could. "Tell me about it; perhaps I can help you," and he put his hand on Nat's shoulder, and walked so.

It was easy to tell a trouble to the new curate, at least Nat found it so. Before they had reached the vicarage gate, Mr. Andrews knew all the trouble and the cause of it. Nat told it simply and truthfully, hiding nothing.

When Mr. Andrews parted with him, he retraced his steps to the cottage, and on the way met David, his satchel slung over his back, his head drooped, and the sullen frown heavy on his brows.

"David Barnes?"

"Yes, sir," said David, touching his hat, wondering to see the curate walking out so early, but still more at the familiar use of his name.

"I have been walking down with your brother, David—a good brother—a loving brother—a brother who deserves to be loved—Nathaniel, in whom there is no guile."

David looked up and smiled. The smile chased away the heavy frown. "Thank you, sir," he said. "Nat is all you say—no one should know that better than I."

The curate thought he had found out David's redeeming point—love for his brother.

"We have been chatting—Nathaniel and I—and he has told me the trouble, David, my lad," he said kindly.

For a moment the blood rushed wildly to David's face. Was he going to help him? Could he help him after all? But the next words sent the quick blood back, leaving the face paler than before.

"I wish I were in a position to help you, but I am not, and cannot do so; but I sympathise with you heartily. Let me comfort you in the way I can. You know who sends the trouble, David?"

David bit his lip disappointed. Yes, he knew all that—that could not comfort him just now. If Mr. Andrews had promised to help him another way—

"Our Heavenly Father," said the curate gently, "our loving Father, who knows better than we what is best for us. It is so hard to believe it sometimes, but we must try to believe and trust. Perhaps you were too ambitious, David?"

"Is it wrong to be ambitious?" said the lad, almost fiercely.

"Wrong? no, not wrong to try and better yourself and your good brother; and that is your ambition, I know. But perhaps you thought too much of it, gave all your time to thinking of it, became lifted up and proud because you had a talent that might raise you above your schoolfellows, treated them sneeringly and overbearingly in consequence, forgetting the great Giver who endowed you with this talent, forgetting to thank Him for it often; for He does love to be thanked. Discontented that your

lot has been cast in a humble sphere ; impatient to better it sooner than God intended."

The flush came again to David's cheek. How did this stranger know his innermost feelings ? It was all so true. He had been overbearing to his companions, thinking himself cleverer than they. Did they not call him " High and mighty David " ? And he had been discontented too, chafing at the long hours spent in school, when he would have spent them at Mr. Linton's piano, and thankless. Had he once in all his life thanked God for the talents that gave him a chance of raising himself and Nat ? Not once, not once ; he had taken it as a matter of course, the talents were his, and his alone, not God's who had bestowed them.

" I was ambitious," said David ; " I am still ambitious. I can't feel content to settle down all my time in the village like the other lads who are willing to be dunces all their lives ; they don't care for books nor reading ; and as for music, oh, sir ! I did set myself on my music lessons ;" and then the boy confided bit by bit all his hopes and dreams, his fears and joys. It was a thing he had never done before to any human being—never to Nat—not even to Mr. Linton, who had taken such interest in him and fostered his ambition. It seemed easy to do so now, the easiest thing in the world, although up to this he had imagined he never could unbosom his secret, and felt too proud, or ashamed, or sensitive, or all three, to speak of it. He did not wonder at himself, or pause to think of his secret being shared by a perfect stranger. Mr.

Andrews did not seem a stranger ; he felt, he understood, he sympathised, and listened so patiently ; and the boy knew it.

"My poor lad," "poor fellow," and "poor David," was all the good curate said every now and then, when the lad raised his eyes to his new friend's in perfect confidence and trust, seeking for the sympathy that always came.

"And when Mr. Linton died so suddenly," said David in conclusion, "I was so stunned I could think of nothing else ; it seemed as if all the world was stopped for me ; and I was hard on the lads at school, and hated them for being so content and happy, and grieving for Mr. Linton because they loved him and would miss him, but not the same as I."

"It does seem hard, David, very hard," said Mr. Andrews ; "yet we dare not judge our God. Your ambition was right so far as it made you wish to better yourself, to enable you to work for and repay the good brother who, as you say, has done so much for you ; but you thought too much of yourself and of him, and the music lessons, and your daily round, to please God, who wants our thoughts and hopes, and thanks as well. You made no time in your busy life to pause and say : "God, I thank Thee for the talent Thou hast given me," or "Help me to improve it," or "Thou knowest my hopes ; let them please Thee, and bring them to pass."

"But I say my prayers regularly night and morning, sir ; I have always been steady ; I have signed the pledge and kept it too, not like some

of the lads about, who break it from time to time. I don't know what it is to be idle; I never waste a moment; ask any one that knows me—ask Mr. Bilham."

"Ah, David! it is not only regular prayers that God requires, nor to be steady and industrious, nor to sign the pledge; all these are excellent things, that give us credit and bring their own reward, things that it is our duty, too, to do; but God also says: 'My son, give Me thine heart.' He is pleased with you, David, for performing your duty so creditably, and loves you for it, and has pleasure in you; but He wants you to think of Himself oftener, to bring you nearer to Him; and perhaps He lets this trouble come upon you that you may pray to Him, *ask* Him, *beseech* Him, *talk* to Him to help you, and *thank* Him often that He has given you more talents than your schoolfellows."

Mr. Andrews put his hand on David's shoulder as he had done on Nat's, and walked so through the village with him, and David could not resent anything he said or did; he felt less proud this morning, and listened humbly. Mr. Andrews made him *feel* the wrong was with himself, not with God.

"And now, David, what are you going to do? What are your plans for the future?"

"The lessons, sir, and the school, I must go on with them till my time is up; and if I pass the examinations, I shall get a place as master somewhere in a National School."

"And isn't it worth trying for, and hoping for,

and being content with? Think of yourself in years to come in Mr. Bilham's place, assisting Nat so that he need not work so hard!"

"Ay, sir, but I love the music—'tis a grand thing. I don't *love* the school nor the books."

"We cannot always have what we like best. And if you do succeed in becoming a national schoolmaster some day, there will be nothing to hinder you from taking music lessons then and paying for them yourself. Think of that, David! That's the grandest thing of all!"

There was no resisting Mr. Andrews' winning eyes and catching laugh. David laughed too; his eye grew bright, and his heart felt altogether lighter. "It would be a grand thing, sir," he answered, almost joyously.

"Grand! I should think so," and Mr. Andrews laughed again. "And now we must part, David. I shall just reach the church in time for morning prayer. Go on steadily with your books, be patient and hopeful, and always come to me for help. I shall be your friend, my lad."

"I will, sir; thank you, sir," and David touched his cap, and stood for a moment looking gratefully after the curate's retreating figure.

Where was the load on his heart, the load he had carried with him ever since Mr. Linton's death? It was so light that it pressed but little on him just now. He *would* be a musician yet—some day. The time might be longer coming, but, as Mr. Andrews said, "It would be a grand thing to pay for his own music lessons;" and he could too, if he

got the place of master. There was Mr. Bilham, who had something like £90 a year!

"£90 a year! I needn't have troubled so much if I had thought of that before. He's a rare one, is Mr. Andrews." And David's thoughts turned gratefully again to him; and, remembering the little sermon the curate had preached all to himself, David lifted his cap half shyly from his head, and said reverently, "Thank God for our good curate."

He reached Mr. Bilham's house, and was turning the handle of the door, when old Matthew Evans, the organist, coming out of his own house opposite, crossed the road, and spoke to him.

"Good morning, David Barnes. I've wanted to speak before, but I've not had a chance. I'm very sorry for you, David, that your music lessons have been stopped so suddenly. I know Mr. Linton paid for them, and that your heart was much set on them. I never had anything extra myself in lessons, lad—I am mostly self taught. I can't promise to teach you one half, nor a quarter of what your grand French master taught you; but if you like to have a practice any time on my little harmonium at home, you're quite welcome, and I've no objection to helping you in a thing or two, though maybe you know as much as, or more than, myself."

The blood rushed to David's face. He thought God was answering him already for having thanked Him for the good curate. If he had not met Mr. Andrews he would probably have turned away in scorn from the old organist's offer, and refused it

politely but stiffly. Now, his heart was softened, and all the angry, bitter feelings had fled. He knew Matthew Evans could teach him very little if anything after the great Frenchman, but the practice on the harmonium would be an excellent thing.

"Thank you kindly, sir," he answered gratefully. "I shall be most thankful if you will let me; and if you could tell me a thing now and then 'twould help me very much. I'm very grateful, sir."

"That's right," said the old man, well pleased at his offer being accepted so kindly, "and come any time, David, any time and try a tune or two. There are several nice little pieces I amuse myself with playing, besides hymns and chants and voluntaries, all ready on the harmonium, and you're very welcome to pick out the notes and practise 'em. It'll be an exercise in reading music, and that'll do you good. There, there, good-bye," he cried, as David began to thank him again, "I'm glad you like it—don't say any more; and there's Bilham looking out of the window for you; go in or you'll be late;" and the kind old man made his way off as fast as he could to the church, for he made it a point always to attend at morning prayer.

And David, finding it good to thank God, thanked Him again, and resolved to follow as closely as he could the good curate's teaching, and went in with a light heart and bright face, and set to work in earnest, pleasing Mr. Bilham with his strict attention and eagerness to learn.



CHAPTER VII.

SAMBO'S HALF-CROWN.

GET off to school, now do, Sambo; there's the bell a-ringing; it'll stop next minute; you'll be in time; here's your cap. Sambo, d'you hear me?" cried the little gipsy woman, shaking her graceless son by the shoulder.

It was washing day, and the poor little soul had her hands full; she was tired of seeing Sambo playing idly with the kitten, and making no effort to help her, nor to get out of her way.

"Ain't you going to school this morning, Sambo?" she said again.

"No, I ain't; bother school," said Sambo, jerking her hand off. "I'm going out somewheres presently."

"I wish you'd get out of my way. Come, take those idle legs of yours off; you're the plague of my life."

"Ruffian Rob'll come down next fair; I'll go off with him, you'll see. You've told me often enough I'm the plague of your life."

"And you are, too. Oh! Sambo, why don't you be a better boy to me?" and Mrs. Finch began

to cry. Tears came very easily to her, and any mention of Ruffian Rob's name brought them flowing freely. She had seen little or nothing of him since her marriage with the stalwart collier, but she could never forget his fierce and cruel nature, and the hardships he had often made her suffer; and her great fear was that Sambo had inherited his uncle's nature, and was fast following in his steps. Ruffian Rob had taken a fancy to Sambo, and treated him freely when he came down for the annual fair; and Mrs. Finch knew it would take very little persuading on the uncle's part to coax Sambo to go off with him some day.

Sambo was used to his mother's tears, so they affected him but little. "You shut up," was all the comfort he offered her; "I'm off to earn a heap o' money to-day."

"If you only went to school regular for another year," she whimpered, "the vicar'd get you some respectable work, Sambo, where you could earn money and help me. You'll do no good living a vagabond life."

"Gipsy life's the thing for me. Why, you was a gipsy yourself, mother, and own sister to Ruffian Rob."

"Ay, and more hardships than you think for in it. I've been much happier since I've settled down. Don't think on gipsy life, there's a dear."

"Well, I ain't off on it just yet, so where's the trouble? and I've got a job on hand that'll fetch as much as you gets in two days and a half, you'll see."

"I wish you had, Sambo, with all my 'art," she answered; but she did not for a moment believe him, for Sambo did not always speak the truth to her. "But be off now, like a good fellow; I can't get on with you in the way; the room's small enough without that. I wish there was no such thing as washing-day, that I do." She carried the tub of soap suds across the room and set it down with a sigh.

"Is it heavy?" asked Sambo.

"As heavy as I can carry, but it well nigh breaks my back, and there's all the water to fetch yet from the pump." She looked such a poor little woe-begone thing, with the tear stains on her face; and another sigh made Sambo pause in the doorway. He was getting ready to start for the oak ferns that Miss Linton had promised to pay him so liberally for, and when he heard that sigh, the conversation he had had with Miss Linton flashed across him: "Perhaps you worry and torment her now that you are big, forgetting the care she took of you when you were little and helpless."

And he had said, "I never carry her pails for her, nor nothing."

He would like to tell Miss Linton when he saw her in the afternoon that he had helped his mother; he would like to see those beautiful eyes brighten with pleasure, and receive her praise. He looked up the road in a hesitating way, and slung his basket over his shoulder. He hated work of any kind that was not congenial to him at the moment; he disliked above all carrying pails of water, and yet the charm

of Miss Linton's presence came over him again; no one so beautiful or so richly dressed had ever spoken to him as she did—he *would* please her. He threw down his basket and said gruffly—

“I'll fetch a couple of pails full from the pump. Now then, look sharp.”

“Oh! Sambo,” cried the little woman, too surprised to say any more; and she pushed the pails towards him.

The pump was at the top of the road, quite a hundred yards away. Sambo was a sturdy little fellow, yet it took all his strength to lift those heavy pails when he had filled them both; he stopped to breathe twice before he reached his mother's cottage, and for the first time in his life something like pity for the poor weak little creature who worked for her daily bread and his passed through his mind.

“'Ere they are,” he cried, puffing and panting; “where'll I turn 'em in? I'll get you another lot afore I'm off.”

“'Ere, Sambo, 'ere in the empty tub,” she answered with alacrity, her beady black eyes beaming with affection; and Sambo emptied his pails, and started off for another lot.

“'Ave you got enough now?” he asked gruffly, when two more pails were brought. He spoke gruffly because he was somewhat ashamed of his unusual kindness, and thought the gruffness might cover it over a little.

“Oh! plenty, Sambo, and you 'ave been a 'elp to me. You've brought 'em so soon too; it takes

me half-an-hour carrying water;" and Mrs. Finch tucked up her arms and set to work with a light heart, lightened by Sambo's care.

"Ain't you going to school?" she asked coaxingly, taking advantage of his soft mood.

"Not I! 'aven't I told you I've got a job on hand? Where's my basket and the little fork? Well, I'm off now," he nodded, and, with a glance of satisfaction at the well-filled tubs, Sambo started, whistling up the road.

It was a long walk into the woods, and a long way to the spot where the oak ferns flourished; but he loved the trees and the soft green moss and the hardy bracken; often he turned his foot from crushing a tiny fern, and here and there a patch of bluebells made him pause to admire and scent them. He was happy too—no one ever repents having done a kind action—he had done a kind action that morning, and the remembrance made him glad. Then, too, came the thought of being able to tell Miss Linton—she little knew what a hold her beauty and sweetness had on wicked Sambo. When he reached the place, he worked away contentedly at the ferns, clearing the roots of the stones that clogged them, and with quick and clever fingers succeeded in bringing them up one by one uninjured, and laid them on the grass till he had counted twelve; then he placed them carefully in his basket, and trudged homewards.

Dinner was ready, and Sambo was ready for it. "Wherever have you got them sweet little ferns, Sammy?" asked Mrs. Finch admiringly, tenderly

touching the delicate things, "and what for? Is any one a-wanting of 'em?"

"Didn't I tell you as I was going to make a heap o' money this morning?" said Sambo, with his mouth full of potato.

"Has any one asked you to fetch 'em, Sammy? And is they going to pay for 'em?" she questioned eagerly.

Sambo nodded. "Miss Linton has ordered 'em. I seed her myself; she's going to give me 'alf-a-crownd!"

"Oh! Sambo, don't tell me no stories," she cried, shaking her head at him.

"I ain't telling none, you'll see;" and Sambo chuckled.

"'Alf-a-crownd! you never had so much money in your life afore! Bless me! It's as much as I'd earn in 'alf a week. Don't tell me no stories, Sambo; and if you aren't, don't forget your poor mother as works 'ard for you."

"Hall right, you jest leave me alone;" and she went back to her wash-tub, having eaten her dinner of potatoes before Sambo came in. "Your face ain't fit for gentry, Sambo," she said, when he had finished his meal. "If you be going to see Miss Linton, you'd best clean yourself."

"Wall, chuck some of 'em suds in the basin, and I don't mind 'aving a wash."

The little woman complied, and Sambo tucked up his ragged sleeves and began operations. He was ready at last; the basket was slung over his shoulder, and he started off, his heart beating high with hope, towards Mr. Linton's old home.

"Well, Sambo, those ferns do you credit," said Mrs. Mills, when she opened the door for him; and she looked in his clean face approvingly. "Why don't you turn over a new leaf, and give over being a little vagabond? I'm sure you could if you tried."

"I dessay I shall afore long. I'm looking out for the place o' 'ead gardener at the vicarage," said Sambo with a leer.

"Little imp," muttered Mrs. Mills indignantly; and she ordered him sharply to wipe his shoes. But when he was shown into Miss Linton's room, an awed shyness took the place of the impudent grin.

She came forward to meet him with a gracious "Good afternoon," and smiled so bewitchingly that Sambo was fascinated. She looked even more beautiful than when he had seen her last, and he looked up at her shyly, but with much admiration in his coal-black eyes.

"Oh! Sambo, how beautiful," she cried. "What a clever boy you must be to get them up so carefully; there's not a frond broken!"

"I don't think there is, ma'am," he said, abashed at the praise from her sweet voice; but his heart beat high with pride.

"I wish you were going to plant them for me—you understand them so well. I am half afraid of the delicate things. How would *you* plant them, Sambo? Would they grow best in a box for the window, or in the open ground, or in pots? Tell me all about it."

"I'd put 'em in the open, if I was you," he said,

thinking he could never be wicked nor impudent, if all people were like her. "I'd 'ave a warm corner in the shade a bit, under a tree like, where a little sun could get at 'em now and agin, and plenty leaf soil, and I'd water 'em well after sundown in the dry weather."

"I wish I had you to put them down yourself, Sambo," she said; "no one could do it better than you."

"I wish you was a-going to take me; I'd be good if I was your servant," cried Sambo, in a burst of admiration.

"Poor boy," she said gently. She saw his admiration, and liked it too—yes, liked to be admired even by dirty Sambo. "Have you tried to be good since yesterday, my boy?"

"Yes," he answered with brightening eyes. "If you please, ma'am, I carried mother's pails of water for her washing this morning."

"And what made you do that, Sambo?"

"Because you asked me."

"And will you do it again for my sake, if I ask you?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Thank you, Sambo; that makes me very happy. Will you try to remember that? Didn't it make your mother happy this morning?"

"Ay, it did; she was that pleased; she said it made her back ache a-carrying of 'em."

"Poor mother! Oh! Sambo, help her whenever you can; keep her from having back-aches; you will try, won't you, for my sake?"

"Ay, that I will."

It was easy for Sambo to promise it. Her sweet eyes glistened, as if tears were very near, as she looked down so gently and pityingly at the little ragged urchin whose rough soul had been captivated with her beauty.

"Then I shall trust you, Sambo, and I need not ask you to spend this half-crown wisely ; I feel sure your mother will come in for a share—for my sake,"—she added the last words softly as she put the half-crown in his hand. There was nothing more to say. Sambo thanked her, and pulled a lock of matted hair, and felt too much softened to answer Mrs. Mills when she showed him out, and advised him grimly "not to fritter away Miss Linton's money on rubbish or nonsense."

He felt rich as he turned down the road. It was a new half-crown piece, and it glistened in his hand ; he rapped it with his knuckles, and flung it in the air, and felt it between his teeth. It was four o'clock, and the boys from the National School came racing down the hill. Sambo made towards them grinning, with the precious half-crown held between his teeth to show it off.

"Hey ! Look at Sambo ! what's he got in his mouth ?" cried a bright-eyed youngster.

"Hillo, Sambo ! where did you get that from ?" and they crowded round him full of curiosity.

"It's a'alf-crownd, and Miss Linton give it me," said Sambo proudly, taking it out of his mouth and flinging it in the air to catch it dexterously in his hands.

"Oh ! yes, we believe you," cried an unbelieving little urchin.

"Don't believe it's anything of the sort," cried another voice, and the owner made a dash at it and knocked it away before Sambo could catch it. With a howl of rage and fear Sambo dealt him a blow and scrambled with the rest for the possession of the precious silver piece.

"I'll smash any one's 'ead as has got it," he roared, pushing right and left, his black eyes eagerly scanning the ground.

"An' I'll smash your'n for blowing me, when 'twas only in fun," cried the lad who caused the mischief; and he hit Sambo in the face. The blow made his nose bleed, and Sambo flew at him again, and a fight ensued.

Other boys coming later out of school now came up, some laughing, some urging them on, others inquiring the cause of the fight.

"What's the good of fighting about it?" asked Martin, who, though the biggest and strongest lad amongst them, was noted for his peaceable disposition; "give over, I say; and who's found the half-crown?"

"I've got it," said one, producing the coin.

"Well, just keep it safe, and let's separate 'em. Hist, Sambo; give up, Tom; and here's Mr. Andrews coming! There, take your half-crown, Sambo," and Martin pushed it into his hand, and Tom, catching sight of the curate making towards them, ran off as fast as his legs could carry him.

Poor Sambo! the beautiful new silver piece was scratched by somebody's heel, and the dust had dimmed its brightness. He was angry and

sore, and all the happy influence of Miss Linton's presence had vanished. He was in no mood to be lectured by Mr. Andrews, so he made off the other way, wiping his still bleeding nose on his ragged sleeve.

Mr. Jarvis, who kept the "Three Feathers" Inn, was standing in his doorway, and he beckoned Sambo as he passed.

"What's come to your nose, Sambo; have you been fighting?"

"Ay, I have just;" and he rubbed the half-crown between his palms, to rub it bright again.

"Why, what have you got there?" asked the innkeeper, "a two-shilling-piece, eh? come in, come in."

"It's a 'alf-crownd," he answered, showing it up, "and that's what I've bin fighting about."

"You don't mean you run off with it—stolen it, eh?" asked Mr. Jarvis, looking suspiciously at him.

"Bless your 'art, I've earned it;" and Sambo took a seat in the tavern, and told the innkeeper how he had got it, and how the fight came about.

"It's scratched and dirty now," he said ruefully, "but I gave Tom Blake a stunner for it, and, after all, the value's the same, ain't it, Mr. Jarvis?"

"You're right there," he answered; and "so 'tis, so 'tis," said one or two other men who were sitting smoking in the tavern. "You hand it to Jarvis there, Sambo, and he'll give you the correct change, after taking the price of a pint of beer, and maybe give you a brighter bit or two," added the first speaker.

"Well said," cried an ugly red-faced lounge; "but make it a quart, Sammy, make it a quart, and treat your betters."

"And I say 'Hear, hear!' to that," said the first speaker, putting down his pipe; "and we'll make it up to ye another time, Sammy."

Poor Sambo! It was not the first time he had had some beer in Mr. Jarvis's tavern, and it made him feel very big to be in possession of so much money, and to have these men asking him to treat them. No remembrance of Miss Linton held him back. The fight had put her out of his mind altogether just now.

"Wall, I don't mind," he said, in as grown-up an air as he could, throwing down the half-crown, "tap a quart o' beer, Mr. Jarvis, and give it round."

"Well said," said the red-faced lounge, clapping him on the back, "well said, Sammy!"

An hour later, the little gipsy woman came out of her cottage to look up the road for the twentieth time for the absent Sambo.

"'Ave you seen Sambo anywheres about?" she asked Martin, who happened to pass just then; "'tis long past his tea-time, and his tea's as cold as stone—he do generally come in sharp for his meals, and I 'aven't seen nothing of him this blessed afternoon." As a rule, she did not trouble much about Sambo's whereabouts, but her thoughts were dwelling on the half-crown, and already she had planned how to spend half of it, should Sambo be coaxed into giving her part.

"Ain't Sambo home yet?" asked Martin, stopping.

He had seen him enter the "Three Feathers," but had not thought about it since. Now the remembrance of the half-crown flashed across him, and he cried out excitedly, "Why, Mrs. Finch, he must be a-spending his money at the 'Three Feathers,' for I saw him go in with Jarvis, when we come out o' school; he had a half-crown piece as was given him by Miss Linton."

Martin found himself talking to the empty air, for, with a cry, the little gipsy woman started down the road, and made her way to the tavern with a heavy sinking heart, and rushed straight into the tap-room, where the red-faced loungee was regaling them with a drunken song. Sambo sat lolling in his chair, with his legs spread out, his heavy eyes fixed on the singer, trying to join in the chorus. That was not the only quart of beer paid for out of Sambo's money.

She rushed up to him and dragged him up by the shoulder, and burst into a wild wailing cry: "O Sambo! whatever'll your poor mother do with you? You breaks my 'art every day!" Then she turned in fury on Jarvis and the loungees there—

"And you as calls yoursel's men, to tempt a child and rob him of his earnings—shame on you!" and crying bitterly, she pushed Sambo out at the door, and gripping his arm firmly, led him home.

It was a miserable home-coming, and she had fancied it would be so different. Sambo wrenched his shoulder from her grasp and threw himself into a chair. She took the only other one in the room, and sat sobbing as if her heart would break, with her apron over her head.

Sambo sat staring moodily into the dying embers in the grate. His head ached wretchedly, and he was sober enough to feel that his precious half-crown had been foolishly spent. The sight of the poor little broken-hearted mother opposite brought back Miss Linton's words: "Then I shall trust you, Sambo, and I need not ask you to spend this half-crown wisely; I feel sure your mother will come in for a share—for my sake."

"Here," he said in a shamed voice, "'tis no good crying over spilt milk; 'tain't all gone, here's nine-pence out of it; take it, 'tis all I've got;" and he threw a sixpenny piece and three coppers into the little gipsy woman's lap.

"I'm sorry enough the money's gone," wailed the poor soul; "God knows we want it bad enough; but it ain't only that—it breaks my 'art to think of your going to sich places and drinking with sich a low lot."

"It's done for now," answered Sambo gruffly; "what's the good of talking 'bout it? I'm off to bed."

And he went to bed; but before sleep came to his heavy eyes, the fervent wish passed often through his mind that Miss Linton would leave Ravenswood soon, and never know how he had betrayed her trust.





CHAPTER VIII.

THE SCHOOL TREAT.

THE annual Whit-Monday treat that had been put off on account of Mr. Linton's death, was fixed for the second Monday in July. It had not rained for a fortnight, and there was no sign of rain for another fortnight. Farmer Joyce said so himself, and he was generally to be relied on as regards the weather. This was Sunday, and every boy and girl in the parish of Ravenswood, who attended the church Sunday-schools, was restless with delightful anticipation. It was a treat for Sunday scholars only, and the regular attendance of each child was required for six Sundays punctually preceding the treat day, before he could secure a ticket of admission into the tea-room, unless, of course, sickness or any other reasonable excuse kept him away.

To-day the streets were crowded with children making their way to the schools, and the school-rooms became fuller every moment; indeed, the teachers had their hands full to look after them, and keep the unusual numbers in order. All the

negligent and unpunctual scholars were in their places to-day, as well as the good ones who had attended regularly all through the year.

Sambo, in his Sunday suit, looking rather the worse for wear, was hurrying along too. He disliked Sunday school, but he dearly loved tea and cake, and the scramble for nuts and biscuits in the field afterwards. He appeared in his class at intervals during the year whenever it suited him to go. But no boy had been more punctual in his attendance than Sambo during these last six Sundays.

"Isn't it weather for treats, lads?" cried Martin, as a group gathered outside the school-gates to chat before the bell stopped. "Whit-Monday wasn't half so warm and sunshiny. I wish the treat always came in July."

"So do I," said Kenny Froome; "we can sit about anywhere without being told to get off the grass lest we should catch cold; and the girls are in such a fidget if the ground is damp, and so frightened to mess their clothes. Here's Sambo, regular for the sixth Sunday. Hurrah, Sambo! d'you expect to get a tea-ticket?"

"Rather," said Sambo, shutting one eye. "I've made myself plain with the rules, I have, afore I come to school for nothing."

"It ain't fair, I think, that fellows that never come to school should get as much as us good ones who 'tend regular," said little Bertie.

"Hark at Bertie," cried Martin, laughing; "he wants to cut Sambo's cake in half and only give him one cup of tea. There'll be enough for you,

greedy-gut, never fear; I've seen a pile of cake taken away after the tea."

"He'd best not want to cut my cake in half," said Sambo, nodding darkly. "I'll cut him in half and eat his share, too, if he gives me any of his cheek. Have a fight, young 'un?"

"I don't fight with lads that spend all their earnings at the 'Three Feathers,' along of Mr. Jarvis," retorted Bertie, slinking behind tall Martin.

Sambo made a dart at him with his fists doubled, but Martin spread out his hands.

"Shame on you! who talks of fighting on Sunday, just afore school, too? And what a precious donkey you are, Sambo; for never a tea-ticket would you get if Mr. Andrews or one of the teachers caught you fighting to-day. And, Bertie, keep a still tongue in your head. You wouldn't be half a bad one, if you weren't always thinking of your stomach!"

"Bertie and his stomach again," said David Barnes, coming up with Nat; "it's always Bertie and his stomach!"

Bertie's face flushed crimson, especially when Sambo burst into a jeering laugh.

"Pish!" cried Martin, who loved peace, "what's the good of talking unpleasant things with the treat so near to-morrow. Say, Nat, has Mr. Jasper given anything out of the shop towards the treat this time?"

"Ay, hasn't he! I carried a great bag o' nuts and another of biscuits up to Farmer Joyce's yesterday. The master is better than some of you think.

I'm to have another holiday for the treat to-morrow, and it's agin the rules, you know, for Whit-Monday the shop were closed, and I didn't do no work," answered Nat.

"It's mighty generous of a man who keeps so big a shop as Mr. Jasper, to give a bag of nuts and biscuits," said David scornfully.

"Hush, lad," whispered Nat in a distressed voice—he was so loyal to his master, he could not bear David's speaking so of him—"it's all his own to give or to keep."

"He has three girls who'll feast at the treat, so it's no wonder," said Kenny Froome.

"And they are such pretty darlings," laughed Martin, "with their yellow curls. Kenny's sweet on them; he never took his eyes off them last Sunday. There's the bell stopped—now for school."

"It's them who stares at Kenny," said another choir boy, "and don't Kenny like it, and don't he sing well for them!"

Young lads as they were, each had found out the other's weakness.

Mr. Jasper stood within the open shop door next morning with his hands in his pockets, content and pompous. He had sent a bag of nuts and biscuits as his share to the school-treat, and felt he had done his duty.

"Father, isn't it a lovely day?" said his youngest child, creeping up to him and slipping her hand into his arm; "a lovely day for the treat, father!"

Mr. Jasper had three children, all girls. They were all pretty, with long golden curls and winning

faces, but the youngest carried the palm, and was the father's darling. Her soft blue eyes were radiant, and her cheeks flushed with excitement. Mr. Jasper looked down on her with pride and love, and catching her up in his arms set her on his shoulder.

"A lovely day, Pussy; and what is my Pussy going to do at the treat?"

She had been christened Evelyn, but Mr. Jasper always called her Pussy, and the others had fallen into the habit too.

While she was telling him about the games they would play in Farmer Joyce's field, Mr. Andrews passed by.

"Good morning, Mr. Jasper. Is the little maid looking forward for the afternoon?"

"Talking of nothing else," laughed the father, fondling the little hand.

"I must not forget to thank you heartily for your generous gifts; the nuts and biscuits will be much appreciated by all."

"Very welcome, sir; we must all do our duty," said the flourishing tradesman, somewhat pompously.

"It's very kind of you to consider that your duty," laughed Mr. Andrews.

"Not at all, not at all," he answered, waving the suggestion away with his disengaged hand; "duty is duty all the world over."

"I purpose holding a short service before the tea," said Mr. Andrews; "we shall have part of the evening service, a children's hymn, and a ten minutes' talk from myself; they have all been instructed to meet at church by half-past three."

"So Pussy tells me. A capital thought, sir; it has my hearty approval."

"And yet the service need not be considered only for the children; I hope as many fathers and mothers who can come will come. I trust I shall see you there, Mr. Jasper."

Mr. Andrews had been a whole month at Ravenswood, but he had never seen Mr. Jasper at church. Mrs. Jasper and the children attended regularly, so the good curate thought this was an opportunity for a word in season.

"That's not in my line, sir, not in my line," said Mr. Jasper, putting Pussy down, and thrusting his hands into his pockets. "Mrs. Jasper and the children attend regularly; church is the proper place for women and children, but I'm a business man."

"Then you do not consider church-going your duty, Mr. Jasper?"

"No, sir, I do not. I work hard all the week; I owe no man a farthing; my business flourishes,"—he glanced admiringly at the new wing that had been added during the last year—"I do my duty to my family and all the hands I employ. I require rest on Sunday."

"Do you not think, then, that Mrs. Jasper requires rest too?"

"She does her duty during the week, no woman better," said Mr. Jasper; "but she works with her hands, not with her brain;" and Mr. Jasper tapped his forehead. "Women, sir, women need religion; what would a woman be without religion? A man can go through the world without it, and keep his

hands clean. Honest, upright, hardworking, providing for his family's present and future, to the best of his ability—that's his religion."

"Nay, Mr. Jasper, it is not; can he keep his heart clean without worshipping and thanking his Maker, and asking Him for his daily bread?"

"God helps those who help themselves, Mr. Andrews; you can't deny that?"

"Ay, but He wants to be asked and thanked in private and in public. He demands this of His creatures."

"I say my prayers, Mr. Andrews," said he pompously, yet somewhat offended.

"Come and say them at church for once; come and try it," urged the good curate.

"I like my own way best, no offence, sir, no offence."

"Ah! we must have a talk some other day about it. Good-day, Mr. Jasper;" and he held out his hand, and shook the other's with a tight grasp.

"He's a good young man," said the flourishing tradesman to himself, looking approvingly after Mr. Andrews, "the right sort for a clergyman, and he's just been doing his duty—*that's his duty*. I like a man who does his duty. He'll do a lot of good in Ravenswood, I'll be bound, before long."

No one could have wished for a finer afternoon. There was not a cloud in the blue sky, and the sun shone so warm and bright; not brighter, however, than the eager faces that thronged the churchyard waiting for the doors to be opened, every child grasping his tea-ticket firmly in his hand, or feeling



"Martin was ready of course—what boy is not ready to climb a tree?"

—"THE CHORISTERS OF RAVENSWOOD," page 99.

for its safety in his waistcoat pocket. Every boy wore his best suit, and the whites and blues and pinks and greys of the girls' dresses made the churchyard very gay.

Mr. Andrews loved order in everything ; so, when the doors were opened, all the first-class boys and girls marched to their usual places in church, the other classes following, and last of all came little dots of three and four, each guarding jealously its tea-ticket.

The service opened with a children's hymn, then a few of the evening prayers, and Mr. Andrews addressed the children in a few simple words.

Their motto for the afternoon would be, "Even Christ pleased not Himself," and from that they must learn not to think of pleasing themselves only, in their games in the field to-day, but must give way to others, and think of others' pleasures before their own.

"Just try it, boys and girls, this afternoon," he said, "and you will find the games so pleasant, and yourselves so happy."

When the short service was over, two of the tallest lads went out and hoisted the banner, and the children were all arranged in procession two and two. Here and there a flag fluttered, the band struck up, and with much chattering and laughter the gay procession started and marched in time through Ravenswood. Many heads were thrust out of windows to look on, and many a mother waved an admiring kiss to her proud little ones.

Now the school gate was reached, where the tea

was spread ; and the cry of "Tickets ready !" passed quickly down the line. One of the teachers stood within the gate to take them, and in the school-rooms other teachers placed the different classes at different tables. No pains had been spared to decorate the rooms ; flags and banners in gay designs hung everywhere, and vases of flowers graced the well-filled tables piled with bread and butter and cake. It was a perfect business to supply the out-stretched mugs for tea after the grace was sung ; but willing hands in time managed to satisfy all. Then the cheers came—the lads enjoying that as well as any part of the feast. The "Queen"—she always headed the cheers, and such a mighty cheer—they were very loyal folk, you see, at Ravenswood. Then "the vicar," and "Mrs. Reynold," who acknowledged it with many nods and smiles, "the curate," the "teachers," and then the tea was over ; and the children, in groups of fours and fives, made their way, as fast as their legs could take them, up the hill to Farmer Joyce's field, where apple-women had already spread their tempting tables of nuts and oranges, and sweets and cakes.

"Say, Mr. Joyce, haven't you got a rope for us to tie up a swing for the little ones in the old oak tree ?"

"And another one for 'French and English' ? You had it last year !" cried another voice.

Farmer Joyce was always prepared for these wants ; he was a fat little man with a broad placid face.

"I don't know but what you may find them in the shed by the stable, if you care to look."

They did care to look, you may be sure, and finding what they wanted, carried off their trophies in triumph.

"Now, Martin—where's Martin? You're wanted to climb the old oak, lad."

Martin was ready, of course—what boy is not ready to climb a tree? The honour of tying the rope fell to Martin, because his arms were the longest, and it wanted an extra long pair of arms to reach that particular bough; moreover, he had a knack of tying a good stout knot that was not troublesome to undo when the day was done. Martin, too, had the honour of trying the swing first, as he had put it up, to find if it would do.

"That's enough for you; now me." "And me after," and so on till all the big fellows had had a try; and when the lesser ones came crowding up, shouting for their turns, the lads carried off the other rope, and prepared for a tug of war. The winning side was just about to shout, "Victory!" when Mr. Andrews came to the help of the weaker ones, and then there was a breathless tug.

"Go it, Martin! Never give way, lads! Pull away, Nat!"

And on the other side—"Pull away, sir! go it, sir! Hey, Kenny!"

It was a terrible tussle. At first the sides were not evenly divided; now Mr. Andrews' coming made it equal. He was not a strong man; he was too short and slightly made for that; but his strength was sufficient for them just now; and cheer upon cheer arose when the opposite side pulled Martin

with his sturdy fellows over the line, and dragged Nat, who had been placed last on account of his weight, over too.

"'Twas all your doing, sir!" said an admiring voice, and "Hip, hip, hurrah for Mr. Andrews!" came from some lusty throats. Even the enemy joined in cheering. They felt rather sheepish at first, for, you see, they had Martin and Nat on their side; but that made the triumph all the greater, and they were generous enough to own it. It was Mr. Andrews' coming that had done it all, and they could not help but admire him, for boys are great admirers of strength.

There were races to be run, and prizes to be won of shillings and sixpences and threepenny bits; and with those tempting stalls of gingerbread and oranges so near, what an exciting time it was!

And then the scrambling for Mr. Jasper's nuts and biscuits! "'Ain't it like hail about one's ears, say, lads?"

"Jolly hail! Wish it always hailed like that."

"Ay, an' I wish it too," laughed Sambo, who was in his element, stuffing his mouth and pockets, and making another dive. What a pushing and scrambling it was! and how much shouting and laughter!

But a hitch would come in the enjoyment now and then. Hitches always do turn up everywhere, children, don't they? Somebody stamped on somebody else's hand, and another somebody kicked somebody else's shins, and that made a little quarrelling occasionally; and then Bertie, alas! poor Bertie!

he made himself sick with the gingerbreads and sweets, and had to put up, as best he could, with the jeers of his companions.

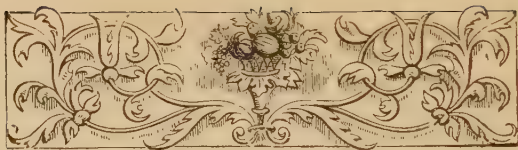
But on the whole it was a charming treat. What a sky there was overhead ! and how the sun shone ! How crisp and dry the grass was under foot, and such a mild soft wind that blew away the heat !

There was the band too, and the good fellows who made the music seemed never to get tired, for tune after tune came swelling from the fifes and drum, and sounded sweetly over the noisy field.

“Give us a polka next time, please do !” was the plea of the little girls, and then such a merry jig they would have over the crisp grass.

As the evening wore on, fathers and mothers came to watch the fun and gather the wee ones together for the return home, and little by little in groups they went away, tired and ready for bed, but oh ! so sad that the happy treat was over !





CHAPTER IX.

"WHAT GREEDINESS GROWS TO."

AND Bertie, poor Bertie! The treat had not ended so happily for him. Bertie had a pain, and sat nursing it sulkily in a corner of the field. He was angry at the want of sympathy in his companions, but they only laughed as they passed by, saying, "It's no wonder you've got a pain when you've been stuffing so!"

And Bertie had stuffed. He was not a swift runner, so he had not won many prizes, and he was by no means as alert as Sambo during the scrambling; but Bertie's mother had slipped a sixpence into his hand when he left home, and his own weekly pocket-money had been spared for this occasion, so he had plenty to make himself sick with, and Bertie was a little boy who did not know when he had enough of sweets and cakes.

The field was thinning fast, and still he sat and nursed his grief, and sulkily refused to join in any game.

"Wall, I'd sit still a bit longer if I was you, till

them cakes have gone down a bit," said Sambo. "Say Bertie, don't you feel nigh bursting?"

"Leave him alone," said Martin; "he looks sick of eating for once."

When they had begun another game Bertie slunk away, and at the gate of Farmer Joyce's field Mr. Andrews joined him. His eagle eyes had seen a great deal that afternoon, more than the boys thought, and they owned his glance was sharp enough, and his ears had heard as much.

There were traces of tears in Bertie's eyes: he was just a little bit of a cry baby.

Greediness is a very unmanly fault: Bertie's greediness made him unmanly.

"What, Bertie boy, hasn't the day ended as pleasantly as it began?" asked the good curate, putting his hand on the lad's shoulder. He had made himself very intimate with his choristers, and the boys already felt very much at ease with him, and seemed to have known him a long time.

"They've been teasing me," said Bertie, with a little quiver of the lip.

"Teasing!" and Mr. Andrews laughed, but not unfeelingly. "Nay, Bertie boy, can't you put up with a little teasing now and then?"

"Ay, but it's what they always tease me about."

"What, always teasing you about something? What can that be?"

Bertie did not think such a direct question was coming, or he would have answered another way. He reddened and stammered; it was not easy to say, "about stuffing."

"Suppose I have guessed it; suppose I have known it all along. Is it greediness, Bertie boy?" It was said in such a way that the lad could not resent it.

"I like cakes and sweets," he said, hanging his head—"for the matter of that, so do all the lads."

"So do I," said Mr. Andrews, "and so does every one I know, and it is not greedy to like them; but to spend all our pocket-money on them, to eat more than is good when we have them, to long continually for them—that is greediness, Bertie."

"Perhaps I like them more than others, perhaps I am a bit greedy," he admitted, "but it's nothing to them, and I spend my own money on it. It's not so bad as Sambo drinking at the 'Three Feathers.'"

"Never mind Sambo's fault, think of your own. Greediness seems a little thing to you just now because it harms only yourself; but do you know what greediness grows to? how much it injures others?"

"I sha'n't be greedy when I'm grown up," said Bertie; "it's only because I'm a boy."

"Nay, Bertie, you must check it now, or the fault will grow bigger and uglier. Have you never read a little story about what greediness grows to?"

"No, sir."

"Then I must tell it you; but I hope you will read it for yourself some day."

"Little Robert was a greedy boy; he loved cakes and sweets, but he thought it, like you, a very insignificant fault. Somebody told him that he did

not know what greediness grows to, or he would try to check his fault. Now Robert was very anxious to know what it led to, and he thought so much about it that he had a dream that night.

"It was a beautiful moonlight night, and, as he lay in bed, a white-winged horse looked in at the window, and told him he had come to show him what greediness grows to.

" 'How can you show me?' said Robert.

" 'You must get on my back first,' said the horse.

"So Robert got out of the window and sat down between his white wings, and the white horse flew away.

"After a long journey he flew down to the ground, and bade Robert get off and go into the cottage close by. Robert did as he was told, and found to his surprise that the door opened of its own accord, and that, though he could see every one, no one could see him. He found himself in a small, cold kitchen, very neat, but very bare, and a morsel of fire flickering in the grate near which a woman sat sewing. She had been sewing all night to finish a piece of work. On one side of the room was a bed in which two children slept, with only a worn piece of carpet to cover them.

"One of the children moved in bed, and she looked round in a frightened way. 'Don't wake yet,' she whispered softly, 'don't wake, to break my heart with your tears, till I get some breakfast for you. I shall soon finish this, and will take it away at once and get money for it.' It was completed in ten

minutes, and with an anxious look at the sleeping children, she folded her work and went out.

“When she was gone Robert peeped into a cupboard that was near, and saw, to his surprise, a loaf of good white bread, half-a-pound of rich butter, and a basin of fine sugar. He was wondering what it meant, when he heard a noise in the other room, and, feeling that he was invisible himself, Robert looked in. A man was just getting out of his warm, comfortable bed heaped with blankets. He was a good-looking fellow, but his face was bloated, and it had a hard and selfish look.

“He bawled out for Peggy to bring some hot water, and as no one answered, he bawled and bawled again. Presently the woman came back, looking happier, for she had brought back sixpence.

“He asked where she had been, and if she had got any money. He was so fierce and angry she was bound to answer.

“‘I only took a little work home; I wanted money.’

“‘And you got it!’ he cried eagerly.

“‘Only sixpence to get breakfast for the children,’ she said reluctantly.

“‘Oh, that will do!’ he cried, pleased. ‘I wanted something relishing for breakfast; run and get me a sausage at once.’

“‘Oh, I cannot!’ she cried, ‘the children are starving. I sat up all night to earn this.’

“‘Bother the children!’ and he swore an oath. ‘Go and get it directly.’

“‘Oh, please let me keep it!’ she wailed.

" 'If you don't go, I'll wake Molly.' "

" 'Ah! don't, don't; poor child, she did not have a mouthful of supper last night.' "

" 'Well, it's not my fault,' he said sulkily; 'I work hard enough, and I must have something to eat.' "

" 'There's some bacon,' she said; 'won't that do?' "

" 'No it won't, I tell you. You may keep three-pence for yourself and the children—I will have the sausage with the other half.' "

" 'Oh! sir, what a greedy brute,' cried Bertie—"how that fellow ought to have been kicked." He was listening intently to Mr. Andrews, and his face was flushed with excitement.

" 'You may well call him a brute, Bertie,' said the curate.

" 'Go on, sir, please.' "

'The poor woman said nothing more. She got his coffee and bread and butter ready, and then went out with the sixpence in her hand.

"The husband finished dressing, and Robert was surprised to see what a warm suit he had on. When he came into the kitchen one of the children stirred in her sleep.

" 'Poor little things,' he said, somewhat remorsefully, and Robert thought he was not all bad. But immediately afterwards he sat down to his own breakfast and chuckled greedily over the good things, and muttered, 'One sausage is not half enough, but I'll make Peggy get me something nice for dinner instead.' "

" 'Oh! you greedy beast,' cried Robert, but he

found he was unheard as well as unseen. And the white horse looked in and called him away. Robert climbed on his back and poured all his indignant feelings into his ears.

“‘And yet I knew him when he was a boy like you,’ said the horse; ‘a fine little fellow he was, and very good except for one fault—his love of good things. At first he was only greedy, then he grew discontented if he did not get all he wanted; the next step was to grudge others their share, the next to try by hook or by crook to get it from them; and so on until he grew into the hardened, selfish monster you see—and yet he was very like you as a little boy—you see what greediness grows to.’

“Well, Bertie, the story is too long for me to tell you how the white horse took Robert to one or two more homes to show what greediness grows to, but you can imagine how disgusted he was at the other things he saw. When he woke up he could not think it a dream, and promised his mother faithfully that he would try to give up being greedy, and spend his pocket-money on his brothers and sisters instead of himself.”

“It’s a horrid story,” said Bertie, turning away; “what a brute of a man!”

“And yet the white horse said he was a nice little boy, Bertie.”

“Oh! sir, oh! Mr. Andrews, I shouldn’t like to grow up like that,” cried Bertie earnestly, with the tears starting to his eyes.

“No, I am sure you would not; yet what will

hinder you, if you keep on liking these good things too much?"

"Oh! sir, I will promise you, as Robert promised his mother, never to be greedy again," cried the boy fervently; the story had made a great impression on him.

"Very well, Bertie, and it will be a secret between us; but you must ask God, as well, to help you, my boy."

"Yes, sir, but I have no brothers or sisters to give my pocket-money to."

"That is easily remedied," said Mr. Andrews. "How many little lads and lasses there are in Ravenswood, poorer than yourself, who would be glad of a penny now and then! How much pocket-money do you get a week?"

"Mother gives me threepence."

"Threepence! that's a good deal for a little boy. Now, Bertie, I wonder if you could deny yourself of a penny or a halfpenny a week, to put into the bag as it is handed round every Sunday, a halfpenny of your own money."

"Oh! yes, please, sir, I'm sure I could."

"Don't be too sure, and don't make rash promises; when the time comes, you will find it hard, Bertie boy, but strive, strive hard to deny yourself, and always remember that it is more blessed to give than to receive."

"I'll begin next Sunday," cried Bertie eagerly, "I shall indeed, sir."

"Very well, and I shall trust you, and it will be a little secret between us."

Bertie looked highly delighted. All traces of tears and mortification had passed away, his face was flushed with excitement and the thought of the good resolves he had already made.

"I wish you could tell me the whole of that story, sir; I should like to know the other things little Robert saw."

"I wish you could read it for yourself, my lad, for I have only told you part myself. It is written by a lady who calls herself 'Cousin Kate.'"

"And what is the book called?"

"The story I read is among other tales. The book itself is called, 'Which is my likeness?' Now, Bertie, I have another suggestion to make. Suppose you save the other twopence of your pocket-money, and buy this book for yourself. Before many weeks are over you will have enough, and every penny saved for the book will be one less spent on sweets. It will be a good lesson in self-denial, and when the book is got and paid for, as I am sure it will before very long, you will look back proudly on the many battles gained in the restraint of your appetite, which, as we have seen, becomes such a dangerous thing when not checked in time."

"I should like to have the book," said Bertie, "and it would be a grand thing to buy it out of pennies saved from goodies. I should like to know the rest of that story so much. If you please, Mr. Andrews, would you keep all the pennies for me, if I brought 'em to you, lest I might spend 'em after I've saved 'em for a bit?"

"Of course I shall, my boy; and when I see you

intend to begin in earnest, I have no fear that you will end victorious and conquer this ugly fault. Good evening, Bertie," said the curate, as he turned in at the vicarage gate; "mind I shall look out for the first pennies, and don't let any second thoughts spoil the good resolutions you have made."





CHAPTER X.

BERTIE'S SACRIFICE.

RAVENSWOOD settled down after the treat. It was sad to think it came only once a year. A grand marble stone was placed at the head of Mr. Linton's grave, and the children were already familiar with the inscription on it. The plants about it had spread and grown, and were laden with the bright blossoms he had loved. The boys had not forgotten their promise to Miss Linton, and in turn had pulled a weed up here and there, and in the long dry days, when the sun was parching hot, many a can of cool refreshing water was sprinkled over the thirsty flowers at evening by the cottagers who dwelt nearest, and in whose hearts the memory of the dead man still was green. It seemed a long time since they laid him there, a very long time to those healthy, happy lads. Mr. Andrews had taken his place amongst them now, and they were as loyal to him as ever they had been to the rich and handsome man who had carried their hearts by storm. And Mr. Andrews was loyal to them. He loved his work, he loved Ravens-

wood, he loved the parishioners, but most and above all, he loved his choristers. How many a help, how many a hint to each one he gave; how he watched and struggled with all—how much they would never know until they were men, perhaps, and could look back gratefully on the helps he had given; but they loved him now, and for that love did the right thing to please him, and the good curate was satisfied, but did not lessen his labour or watchfulness. Perhaps Martin was his favourite—"the peacemaker," as he called him. The tall, strong lad, who never used his strength against the weak; whose sweet, clear notes led, Sunday after Sunday, in the choir, and filled the church with music; who was so humble of the talent God had given him. Ah! if he were less unstable, less apt to be led away!

And little Bertie? The pennies were accumulating in the curate's study, and the struggle in self-denial had begun. Whenever a small brown hand stretched out to reach the bag, a pair of grey eyes met shyly the eagle ones, and the little face flushed at the look it found there.

And Kenny's conceit was wearing away. Mr. Andrews had told him a story too about the choir boy who died and knocked at the gate of heaven.

"You cannot enter here," said the angel who kept the gate, "because you cannot sing."

"Oh! sir, I can sing," said the boy, looking proudly up; "I led the anthems and the chants in church! Indeed, I can sing."

“Not one of your songs reached here,” the angel said; “they may have filled the church and delighted the people who heard, but never one soared out of the church and up to the throne in heaven. *We* never heard you sing—you cannot sing,” and the gate of heaven was shut.

So now, when Kenny sang with his face turned towards the congregation, with the blue eyes of the little Jaspers fixed admiringly on him, the remembrance of the closed gate would make him turn away, and, with his eyes on his book, he would trill out some earnest notes, so that they might go out of the church and reach the gate of heaven.

And David—poor David—many a struggle had he. At first it was delightful to go on building castles in the air; how, when he became a man and should acquire the position of national schoolmaster, he would, in a lordly way, pay for his own music lessons. How Nat would be taken from Mr. Jasper’s shop, how they would sell the cottage, and how he would work his way in the world by the wonderful power of knowledge. But little by little the faith and hope that Mr. Andrews had succeeded in planting were drying up, because they had no depth of earth.

There was still the toiling work in school amongst dolts and blockheads all the long weary day; still the lessons to prepare for Mr. Bilham after tea, the dry, hard study; still the early rising and books, books again. The hurried moments snatched from them for the practice on Mr. Evans’s harmonium,

were the bright spots of the week ; but now they were losing their sweetness. He had "picked out all the notes," as the old man had suggested, of the several little pieces, and knew them all by heart. He could not go on practising them for ever and ever ; he was standing still ; and the organist could give him but little help. The old morose look had come back to his face, the old sharp words and bitter answers to his lips.

"I've often a mind to chuck it up, and pitch the books away for good," he cried angrily, as Nat and he sat in the cottage kitchen together.

"Cheer up, Doady—knowledge is power."

Nat had learned that phrase from David, and a glimmering of its meaning had found its way into his simple head.

"A hard road to it," muttered the younger brother, pushing away his book ; "d'you know what it is to have a splitting head, and a sort of buzzing in it enough to drive one mad ?"

"'Tis a hard road to most things," said Nat simply. "I often gets my legs and back aching from running errands and digging."

"'Tis a hard world altogether," answered David gloomily.

"Ah ! but there are many bright spots in it, if we will take the trouble to find them," cried a cheerful voice at the open door, as Mr. Andrews' shadow fell across it. "I have half-an-hour to spare for you this evening, David ;" and the book was opened again, and spread before the two, as the curate took a chair by David's side ; and the lesson was gone over

once more, and made easy to the boy's weary brain by the superior mind.

It was not an unusual thing for Mr. Andrews to drop in thus and help David with his studies twice or thrice a week. He understood the lad's desponding nature, and knew that such aid as he could give was cheering and acceptable. And gradually the heavy frowns ceased to mar the forehead, the naturally intelligent eyes shone with interest, the difficult task was easily mastered, and the boy's heart eased of its burden.

After such evenings David became buoyant and cheerful again. He could talk with Nat of the castle in the air; he could pray and thank again, till the old enemy of discontent would lay hold of him once more. But there was a strong helper near. Back would come the good curate with his cheerful influence, never letting the lad drift away altogether; and so on from week to week; and almost imperceptibly David's faith grew stronger.

It was Saturday, and Bertie's mother had just given him his weekly allowance. He could not always resist buying one of those tempting tarts that were placed in the window next his father's house. Since Mr. Andrews' talk with him, Bertie had often wished that tempting shop window had been at the other end of the village. He passed it so often, you see; and every Saturday, the day he got his threepence, a fresh supply of jam tarts and puffs filled the window of the baker's shop, and it was hard work indeed to resist them. Up to now he had always managed to save at least a halfpenny

for the bag on Sundays, even if he spent all the rest. For the last two weeks he had taken nothing to Mr. Andrews towards buying the book, and his conscience pricked him a little.

He had a vivid imagination, and often and often did he picture the white-winged horse and little Robert, the bare kitchen with the weary mother and the half-starved little ones, and that selfish monster chuckling greedily over his sausage. "I shan't spend anything this week," said Bertie decidedly, "or I'll never get my book. Ugh! you greedy beast!" and he shook his fist at the picture in his mind of the glutton at his feast.

But alas for Bertie's resolves! The smell from the baker's shop was tantalising. It sent the picture from his mind instantly. There would be no harm looking in at the window; he had his three pennies secure in his hand, and merely looking in wouldn't take them away.

How delicious the tarts smelt! Raspberry jam in them too, and raspberry was his favourite jam. How light and flaky the crust round it looked. He was a capital pastrycook, that baker's man; Bertie could testify to that!

"If I spend one penny," said Bertie, "I could put a halfpenny in the bag and save three halfpence for Mr. Andrews. One won't matter much."

His hand was on the door, but just as he was going to push it open, a fall, a crash, and a child's cry made him look round.

It was poor little Annie Green, the child of drunken parents, bruised and beaten almost every

day. She had a very miserable life—there was not a child in Ravenswood who did not pity Annie Green.

Bertie was at her side in a moment, and helped to set her on her feet again; but the spilled milk and the broken jug could not be picked up so easily.

The poor little thing looked the picture of woe, and clasped her thin hands mournfully.

“It wor a ’a’porth of milk,” she cried in distress, “and the jug’s a broken too! Oh! won’t they whop me!”

“You’ve cut your arm,” said Bertie, “and it’s bleeding; doesn’t it hurt?”

“I wish ’twas me only as was hurt,” she wailed. “I daren’t go home and say the jug’s broke, and the milk spilled!”

“Will they whip you, Annie?” asked Bertie compassionately.

“Oh! won’t they just;” and she dug her little bony fists into her eyes, and sobbed aloud.

“Look here,” he said, “it ain’t a big jug, and only a ha’porth of milk. I’ll give you a halfpenny for the milk, Annie.”

“But the jug’s tuppence ’a’penny, and they’ll whop me for breaking it.”

“Twopence halfpenny—is that all?” said Bertie; and his face grew very red as he stooped and gathered the pieces of the little brown jug, and tried to put them together.

Twopence halfpenny and another halfpenny made threepence, and that sum Bertie had in his hand—it

was the thought of that that made him get so red ; and the smell of the raspberry tarts seemed nicer than ever.

"Besides," whispered he to himself, "I wouldn't have even a halfpenny to put in the bag, and whatever would Mr. Andrews think?"

"Oh ! it'll never stick, there's too many pieces," cried Annie ; "I'd better go home and get whopped ! Look 'ere !" and she bared a thin blue arm, bruised from beatings and pinchings.

"I'll buy you a jug," cried Bertie hurriedly, with his face redder than ever ; and he tried not to smell the tarts. "I've got threepence of my own—look here !" and he disclosed three precious coppers.

She looked at him unbelievably, and her face got red and white. Poor little soul ; so seldom was a kindness ever done to her.

"Come along," said Bertie, leading the way, and his heart grew big with compassion and tenderness, and the tarts grew little and contemptible in his sight. The old picture of the winged horse danced before his mind. Annie looked like one of the half-starved children, and he—he felt like the greedy monster, whenever his thoughts dwelt on the tarts, and he hurried faster along.

There was the little crockery shop, with dozens of little and big brown jugs the exact pattern of Annie's.

"A twopenny halfpenny one of this sort," said he, pointing to the brown jugs, to the woman behind the counter, and she reached one down,

the exact size of Annie's, and gave Bertie a half-penny in return for his three coppers.

The child looked on with smiling delight, and when he put the jug into her hand with the half-penny to buy more milk, she could scarcely speak her thanks. But her eyes spoke instead. They haunted Bertie pleasantly for many days, and brought him so much pleasure that he felt amply rewarded.

But the bag passed on Sunday, and for the first time the little brown hand let it go by. The eagle eyes had seen, and the heart of the good curate trembled for little Bertie. For two weeks he had brought him nothing towards the book. Was the boy flagging after resisting so long? And now even the bag had passed by! Had he utterly failed this week?

"Bertie, boy;" Mr. Andrews' voice was very tender, if a little reproachful, as he put his arm about the lad's neck—he had a habit of putting his arm about his choristers' necks, when he walked a little way with them—"Oh! Bertie, boy, nothing for the bag this week? Has the temptation been too strong? You must begin afresh, Bertie; never give way. Have you forgotten the winged horse, the starving children, and the greedy monster?"

"If you please, sir," the lad's voice rang out triumphantly, if the colour in his cheek deepened, and his eye drooped, "I did not spend it on tarts this week, though it's all spent; I gave it to somebody else."

And then, little by little, in an eager, happy voice, the whole story was told. Mr. Andrews' eye kindled, and his face caught something of the boy's triumph as he answered gaily, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."





CHAPTER XI.

THE PARISH DRAWING-ROOM.

AND so the autumn months passed away and winter set in. Bertie had got his book and carried it proudly to his mother and told her the secret of his winning it. On those cold frosty evenings, when her work was done, she would sit by the fire with her knitting in her hand, and listen to Bertie reading his favourite tale aloud. Bertie had no idea that he was so fond of reading, until he got his book. Up to this he had spent his spare time chiefly in playing, or running about the streets, or idling; now, he craved for books, and every week, when the Sunday-school library was open, a halfpenny, that might have been spent in tarts, was eagerly pushed over the table for the loan of some delightful tale.

"Bertie is punishing his stomach to stuff his brain," Martin would say jocularly as the lad heroically passed the tart and sweet-shops with a book under his arm.

But Bertie only laughed in reply. There was nothing to be ashamed of in that.

The great event of the winter was Miss Linton's coming to stay with Mrs. Reynold at the vicarage for a short time. She was one of those charming persons who never force their own sorrows on others ; and though she still grieved deeply for the brother she had lost, it was only in secret, and her bright smile and happy laugh were always ready to cheer and comfort others in distress. Mrs. Reynold could not bear the thought of parting with her, so the weeks glided into months and still Miss Linton stayed on at the vicarage.

"She do make a body feel so pleasant," said Mrs. Crane, as she overtook the little gipsy woman going to the parish drawing-room. "And she will find time to speak to every soul, if it's only to say 'Good evening,' even if there be nigh a hundred in the room."

"She's a blessing in Ravenswood, and may she never go away, that's what I always say," answered the little gipsy woman enthusiastically ; "and what a hold she do have over my poor rough Sambo !"

"And it's my thinking as she may just settle down in Ravenswood for good and all, Mrs. Finch," said Mrs. Crane, looking knowingly out of the corner of her eye, "leastways as long as Mr. Andrews remains curate here."

"Well, they do say so," answered Sambo's mother, looking very wise and returning the knowing look ; and then the two old cronies put their heads together and chatted volubly till they reached the schoolhouse where the parish drawing-room was held.

How delicious it was to get in there out of the cold night air! The warm red curtain that fell across the door was pulled aside when they knocked; and what a flood of warm light burst on them, and what cheery fires, and how much laughing and talking! How that thick cosy curtain shut out all the draughts from that draughty old door that they had suffered so much from last winter. Miss Linton had given the curtain, of course, when she noticed the draught from the door, and also many of the other comforts which struck you pleasantly the moment you entered.

The two friends were warmly received by Mr. Andrews; and the fair, beautiful face that seemed the chief attraction in the place nodded smilingly from the other end of the room.

It was full of life, from boys and girls to white-haired men and women. This was the first winter the present chorister lads were admitted. Children under fourteen were generally excluded; but Mr. Andrews seemed unbappy till he got all his choristers about him there, and some exceptions had been made in their case.

There were dominoes and draughts and pictures for the sedate ones, and a game of "general post" for the boys and girls, with "blind-man's buff" and "forfeits." There were little tables arranged everywhere, with dainty, worked cloths covering them, the gifts of Miss Linton.

"There are so many," she said, "amongst the old and poor who have and see so little beauty in their lives, that I want them to find it here



"David, will you play my accompaniment?"

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and to feel at home with the little bits of refinement, and look forward to, and enjoy them, as belonging to at least a little portion of their lives."

So the tables were decorated here and there with vases holding flowers; also with old Christmas *Graphics*, dated many years back, but the beautiful pictures in them were not less pretty nor less interesting for that. And withered hands turned tremblingly the pages, and dim eyes gloated over the pretty scenes; and the old folk enjoyed it all the more for the sweet scent of the hot-house flowers stealing up the senses, and the gaily worked cloths to rest the pages on.

The piano rattled all the time; and two of the old men, not caring for the pictures, sat close up to the fire, nodding their heads in time, with a pleased smile on their faces, and waiting patiently till the coffee at the other end was ready, the preparation of which sent such a delicious odour everywhere.

And sometimes, when Miss Linton passed by, busy—so busy—ministering to others' pleasure, a pleading "Give us a song now in your pretty voice, miss," from some old admirer would be heard, others would echo the wish, and "Miss Linton's going to sing again" would be passed about the room.

Nat Barnes was there with David. Nat always enjoyed these evenings much, the pictures being such a delight to him. David, in his old morose way, would have kept away from the parish drawing-rooms altogether, but Mr. Andrews insisted on his coming, and the lad soon found out what a treat

he would have missed. Occasionally Miss Linton would ask him to play, and in such a way that he could not refuse her; and by-and-by it became quite a usual thing for David to play two or three times during the evening.

"Give us a song now, do, miss," said a voice again; and Miss Linton, with a pleased smile, for she liked them to beg her to sing, went to the piano—poor piano, it had very little rest on those evenings.

She had always played her own accompaniment, but to-day she stood and looked round the room.

"Where is David? Has any one seen David Barnes?"

"Here he be; here's David;" and the lad was pushed forward from a little group.

He came up reluctantly, shyly, with a frown gathering on his brows; but who could frown long before Miss Linton?

"David, will you play my accompaniment?"

She asked it so encouragingly and so sweetly that the frowns smoothed away, and he took his seat at the piano, with a shy smile, and a look as much as to say, "We two know all about it."

A murmur ran round the room. Surprise and wonderment on every face; and those who were not attending had elbows dug into their sides with, "Look at David Barnes a-going to play for Miss Linton; did you ever?"

And the choristers stood round open-mouthed; and Kenny Froome whispered, "I bet he'll break down," and then, somewhat indignantly, "Fancy, playing for Miss Linton!"

Firmly David struck the opening chords. The song was "The Better Land," and Miss Linton's rich, sweet voice broke the stillness of the hushed room. It was well sung, it was well played; and such a clapping and stamping ensued, and such loud "Encores!" that the last verse had to be gone over again; there was no getting out of it.

There was more clapping when it was finished, and above the noise a voice called out, "Well done for David, say I!" "And that's what I say!" And a chorus of voices took up the cry; and poor, proud David did not know where to look. When all was over, and the room settled again, four pair of eyes looked knowingly at one another; they were Mr. Andrews', Miss Linton's, Nat's, and David's. Those four alone knew how Miss Linton had made David practise that song with her till he was perfect, on purpose to astonish the parish drawing-room goers that evening. She wanted to bring the boy out, and to make him less morose and bitter, and on this occasion she succeeded thoroughly.

"And now, I'm sure you want a cup of coffee after that," said Mr. Andrews, coming up with a very inviting-looking one. "I insist on your drinking this before you wait on others; I know you want it badly;" and he gave her such a look.

But there were cronies all over the room chatting and winking and looking so knowing; and didn't they keep a sharp eye on Mr. Andrews and Miss Linton! They saw that look, and they saw every look; indeed, the young curate would need a very strong guard over his eyes, if he wanted to prevent the

old people from finding out that he was very much in love with beautiful Miss Linton. They were inquisitive old things; they would have liked to know her feelings too; but she was so used to being admired, and always had such a gracious manner, that if she had anything to hide, she hid it better.

While coffee was being handed round; while whole plates of bread and butter disappeared like magic, Miss Linton, gliding graciously among the poor, would slip some coppers into the eager hands, with a softly whispered, "For a cup of coffee and a bun," and scarcely waiting to hear the murmured "God bless you," would be away at the other end of the room ministering to others.

How many said "God bless her," that evening? Some dozens, you may be sure. And when Mr. Andrews saw her as an angel amongst them he said "God bless her," too.

Can you wonder that he was in love?





CHAPTER XII.

THE PEACEMAKER AT WAR.

THE Bishop proposed visiting Ravenswood in the spring, for the purpose of holding a Confirmation service in Lent, so Mr. Andrews was busier than ever amongst his boys, and Miss Linton entered heart and soul into the preparation. Mrs. Reynold ailed very much during the winter, and it became an acknowledged thing that Miss Linton's stay was to be unlimited. Mr. Andrews had the names of about thirty candidates on his list of boys and girls, and amongst them were Nat and David, Martin and Kenny. Bertie was considered too young, and Sambo held off for a long time.

"You must send him to me, and let me talk to him," said Miss Linton. Whenever Sambo was more refractory than usual, the general suggestion was, "Send him to Miss Linton," or, "Ask Miss Linton to speak to him." So Sambo was sent to Miss Linton.

"You need not be confirmed in the end, if you don't wish it, Sambo," said she; "but won't you

attend the classes for preparation, just as a trial? We cannot force you against your will, but I should so like you to attend." The awe and admiration for the beautiful sister of the dead curate still held a place in Sambo's heart, and he consented, though somewhat reluctantly, to be present.

Mr. Andrews held a class twice a week for the candidates, and once a week Miss Linton gathered the lads about her and talked to them in her own gentle, gracious way of the step they were going to take.

It was an anxious time for the good curate, but it brought him much happiness too. The lads could not but be impressed by those earnest talks, and Mr. Andrews spoke exultingly to Miss Linton of the general improvement in his beloved choristers.

"Martin is getting more earnest and reliable," he said, "David more contented and less morose, Kenny thinks less of himself. Do you know that Sambo has missed only one day at the day-school this last fortnight? And Nat—my good, brave Nat—he reminds me more and more of the Nathaniel in whom there was no guile!"

The class had just broken up, and the lads sauntered out of the curate's lodgings at Mrs. Gunter's with the remembrance of the earnest words imprinted on their minds. But they soon began to laugh and talk and jest, as boys will; and, when the little Jaspers passed them for their afternoon walk, they began as usual to tease Kenny Froome.

Nat was very afraid that Mr. Jasper would pull a long face when asked if he might be allowed to attend the preparation classes twice a week, and, indeed, expected a downright refusal, and hinted as much to Mr. Andrews. But when the curate called himself on Mr. Jasper to ask his permission, it was given very willingly.

"I agree with these things," said the tradesman pompously; "and Nat is a good, honest lad, and I can trust him to come back to work directly the class is over, and not loiter about like other young fellows of his age." The truth of the matter was also, that Mr. Jasper had a great respect and admiration for the hard-working curate, and as he still held out about the matter of church-going, he wished to concede in other things, and thought his prompt permission would please Mr. Andrews, and make up for the little dissension about attending church.

The boys were asking Kenny to tell them truthfully which of the Jaspers he admired most, and which of the girls Kenny fancied admired him most, when a strange, odd-looking old woman, with a queer old-fashioned dress and poke bonnet, crossed the road, picking her steps very daintily and lifting her skirts very high, and came on to their side of the pavement, bobbing her head and mumbling to herself some unintelligible words.

"Good afternoon, marm," said Kenny, touching his cap with mock deference. "'Tis a very cold day."

"A very cold day," she answered, with a queer little bob of her head, and went on mumbling to herself.

The boys tittered, and Martin cried, "What a lark! Let's follow her." And he minced his steps and bobbed his head and mumbled in exact imitation of the old lady.

The boys did more than titter now; they exploded with laughter. They were not unkind or cruel fellows, but very thoughtless, and only saw the fun it brought to themselves.

"Sh—sh," whispered Nat, nudging his nearest neighbour, with a look of wonderment on his simple face, "'tis a woman, lads!"

At the same time the old creature turned about, and, staring disapprovingly at them over her spectacles, crossed the road again, picking her steps and lifting her skirts in the same manner.

Martin could not resist the temptation to imitate her again, and doing so with great success he was greeted by bursts of laughter from his delighted companions.

The old lady could see plainly they were laughing at her, and, with an indignant flush on her little withered face, trotted along faster than ever to out-distance them.

Nat Barnes saw the flush, and one of shame glowed on his own face, as he said, not in a whisper this time, with his round blue eyes full of reproach and surprise—

"Nay, lads, 'tis a woman!"

"Are ye sure it ain't a man, silly Nat?" tauntingly cried two or three voices in a breath, and Martin hopped and bobbed again.

"'Tis a shame, I say," cried Nat excitedly, "and

she sees you too ;” and in his indignation he struck Martin on the shoulder.

Nat had a heavy fist, and the blow was not a light one. Martin staggered under it, and, when a fresh shout of laughter greeted Nat’s championship, the peacemaker forgot himself and returned the blow with interest. Back again hit Nat, for his anger was up in defence of the poor old woman opposite ; and the other lads gathered round them, some urging them to stop, while others only laughed. Another couple of blows were exchanged, when a pale, horror-stricken face appeared amongst them, and a voice full of anguish fell on their ears—

“ Oh ! my lads, what is this ? what is this ? Nathaniel—Martin ! Is it possible ? ”

Fresh from his prayers he had come. There, kneeling in his little study alone with his God, he had been pouring out his soul for the lads in his keeping, mentioning them all by name. It was his habit to do so when the class broke up ; and, as he rose from his knees, the remembrance of their close attention and earnest faces as they passed out of the room dwelt pleasantly with him, and he started out for other duties strengthened and cheered. To behold what !

The most promising of his confirmation candidates fighting like street ruffians ; the others hooting like savages—the lads whose names he had cried to Heaven for, only five minutes ago !

Well might his cheek pale, and his voice cry out in anguish, “ What is this ? ”

The peacemaker dropped his fists and gazed

conscience-stricken at Mr. Andrews, and Nat looked white and bewildered.

"Oh! my boys, my boys!" He stood between them with a hand on each arm, and the pain in his voice told them how much it hurt him.

"It was half in fun," said Martin sheepishly, his voice trembling; "we're friends, ain't us, Nat?" and he held out his hand.

"Ay sure," returned his adversary with quivering lips, wringing it hard, "we didn't mean nothing."

"Let me explain—I saw it all," said a chirruping voice; and, with her skirts lifted high in one hand, the little old creature, about whom the fight had arisen, tapped Mr. Andrews' arm with the other, to draw his attention.

"It was all about me, about me, sir, though it surprises you to hear it. I am a queer old body, I have no doubt; and I tickled the fancies of these idle young lads, so much so that they tried to ape my movements—this one," pointing to the abashed Martin, "with great success; and he won the foolish laughter of his companions. But I had a champion," and she patted Nat on the arm affectionately; "he will grow up a fine, manly man, sir; he fought for me, yes, for poor old me, like a veritable cavalier. I shall remember him always with great pleasure;" and, with a sweeping curtsey, the old lady turned on her heel, and hopped and bobbed away very fast.

"'Tis true, every word of it," acknowledged Martin, while the others loudly corroborated it.

"I mocked her, for she did look so funny, and Nat told me to shut up; but I did it again, just for a bit of fun, and Nat hit me."

"And I'm sorry I did," frankly confessed Nat. "Give us your hand again, Martin; and don't ye take on so, Mr. Andrews, sir, for 'tis all right now, and we've made up."

"It's bad enough, but I am thankful it's no worse, my boys," said the good curate earnestly. "Ah, Martin, strive to be less thoughtless; your bit of fun caused pain to the poor old lady's feelings—never think anything fun that hurts a fellow-creature. But I think I may trust you for the future, my peacemaker, mayn't I?"

"Yes, please, sir," said Martin falteringly, and, putting his arm through Nat's, added, "Come on, lad, ye'll be late at Mr. Jasper's after this job." And the two hurried off together.





CHAPTER XIII.

MR. JASPER'S TREASURE.

THE little ivy-covered church was crowded to overflowing that last Tuesday morning but one in Lent. It was a bright day, and warm for that time of the year; and every mother whose boy or girl was to be confirmed that day had managed to finish up the housework and arrange an easy dinner to enable her to get off in time to witness the solemn rite, and pray that the soul dearest to her might be kept in the right way.

The girls in their pure white veils or caps sat on the right, the boys on the left, striving to keep their eyes and thoughts from wandering; the very presence of their teacher, passing to and fro to put a newcomer in his place, helping to reassure and calm them. Everything was arranged in a quiet orderly manner: there never was confusion where Mr. Andrews had the management.

And now the solemn service began, the responses of the candidates given earnestly and fully. The girls were confirmed first; and a prayer from the

good curate's heart went up to heaven when his white-robed choristers left the choir stalls two and two, and kneeled before the aged Bishop. It was all over. "Go straight home, my boys, to-day," were Mr. Andrews' parting words to his lads in the vestry; and the most heedless did not dream of disobeying that command this morning.

Nat and David walked silently home to the three-roomed cottage in the lane.

"It doesn't seem as if anything wonderful had happened," said David, as he lifted the latch.

"Mr. Andrews said we was not to be disappointed if nothing wonderful seemed to come to us all at once; the blessing will come afterwards," replied the elder brother confidently; and he went into the little bedroom to change his Sunday suit for his everyday one, for Confirmation-day did not mean that Mr. Jasper's shop was shut.

No, the routine of business went on more busily than ever, for strangers from outlying villages had come into Ravenswood to see the ceremony; and stream after stream of people poured into the shop to purchase articles they could not procure in their own villages, making the best of this opportunity.

Mr. Jasper's little girls had just returned from church; they had a holiday for the occasion, and Pussy, with her bright curls waving in the breeze, loitered outside the shop door, watching curiously the unusual numbers and the strange faces.

Mr. Jasper had crossed the road, and was in animated conversation with an old friend whom he had button-holed a few minutes before, when Pussy

spied her father, and made a dart to cross the road. There were a good many carriages in Ravenswood that day, and, alas for little Pussy! a pair of restive horses sharply turned the corner, and before any one could stay them, or cry, or lift a hand, the little golden head was under the cruel hoofs.

There was an awful cry, and rushing feet, and the horses pulled back on their launches, but no sound came from the white lips, and the little form lay motionless.

Quick as lightning, Nat was under the horses' heels, and had the little body in his arms; he had just arrived at the shop in time to witness the horrible accident. Like one in a dream, with pallid face and heaving breath, Mr. Jasper stretched out his arms, and gazed helplessly down on the quiet burden.

"Some brandy to put between her lips—quick, master, take her into the shop!"

"Ay, ay, a little brandy! It'll waken her; she's only stunned!"

But one or two shook their heads, and the women about began to wring their hands and cry.

"And there's the doctor! Stop him, for the love of heaven! Doctor, doctor!"

There was a crowd inside the shop, and a crowd outside the shop, and some said one thing, and some another. But in the room upstairs, away from the bustle and noise, where the father and mother alone gazed on their baby, the doctor shook his head.

No hope—none. For little Pussy was dead!

"She scarcely suffered, Mr. Jasper; there was no pain; a sharp blow from an iron hoof on her temple, and it was over."

And he left them with their dead. A motion of his hand, and a few whispered words, scattered the crowd inside and out. "Go home quietly, like good people; you can do nothing here!"

In ten minutes more not a soul was seen in the shop except Nat putting up the shutters. And so the Confirmation-day wore away with a shadow over Ravenswood.

She was the apple of his eye, his pride and delight; and the pompous tradesman sat humbled and broken-hearted in his chair.

He would like to have the first part of the burial service read in church over his little angel Pussy; and only Mr. Andrews should read it.

"For where your treasure is, there shall your heart be also." These words had got into his head somehow, and he muttered them to himself a hundred times a day; and with bowed head he sat in church the first time since many years, brought there by little Pussy's burial, and still repeated the words. And after, when the grave was covered up—the little grave—he waited to lean on Mr. Andrews' arm, to be taken home by him; and as they passed out of the gate, he looked back and muttered once more, "For where your treasure is, there shall your heart be also."

"Not there, Mr. Jasper, not there," said the curate, seeing the backward look; "your treasure is in Paradise, singing with the redeemed."

It was a beautiful thought, and it comforted Mr. Jasper not a little. He liked to think of little Pussy singing with the redeemed in Paradise.

Perhaps it was that thought that made him like to come to church ; perhaps he felt nearer her there. Whatever it was, the portly figure of the successful tradesman, with head a little bowed, and somewhat less pompous, was to be seen Sunday after Sunday at the head of his wife's pew.

And the spring days became longer and warmer, and Ravenswood folk talked of summer being near.

Miss Linton had gone on a visit to other friends. She had no settled home of her own ; the late curate had been her only relative. But she had promised to come back before summer.

She said she loved the place where her brother was buried ; but she may have loved it more for another reason, a reason the old cronies could talk about for an hour together.

Mr. Andrews had much to tell her when she came back. His boys—he had such hopes of them ; they could not be perfect, of course ! They broke down now and then, but on the whole they were such steady lads, such *dear* lads. He wished their work might always lie near Ravenswood, so that he might help them in their manhood ; and if they should be scattered away in the wide wide world, he could trust that the good seed implanted had taken root, to bear fruit wherever their lot might be cast.

And Sambo ? Ah ! yes, Sambo was her boy. She had a particular interest in the rough fellow

whose heart held a tender spot for her. He had not been to Holy Communion since Easter Sunday. That was the first and last time he had partaken of the Sacred Feast; but Mr. Andrews did not despair.

"The memory of that once will cling to him. I am thankful that Sambo was persuaded to come at all."

"And how about school?"

"Ah! Sambo will never love school; but on the whole he is a better boy. I have got him into the choir again, and up to this he has presented a clean face every Sunday. I am trying to instil a little pride into him. Really his voice and ear are equal to Martin's. You should see the little gipsy woman's face! She can't take her eyes off Sambo in the choir, and is as proud of him as proud can be."

"I hear the fair is to be held next month. I do hope the man they call Ruffian Rob won't come to unsettle my *protégé*. Mrs. Finch seems to hold Rob in terror."

"Ah! the fair—the fair unsettles me when I think of it; there will be so many temptations attending it, for my lads. I shall be heartily glad when the fair is over and done. Boy-like, they are all looking forward to it, poor fellows! There are many simple pleasures attending it, I know; still I dread the temptations. We can only trust and hope."



CHAPTER XIV.

THE FAIR.

SUMMER again! summer, with the sunshine and flowers! Our lads come trooping out of school with whoops and shouts, very little changed since last year. Taller! Oh! yes, by a few inches. Martin doesn't know how to hold those long arms and legs, and Bertie has shot up wonderfully. But the hearts are boys' hearts still; you would find that out in a few minutes, if you listened to their eager talk about the coming fair.

"Three gipsy caravans passed our house this morning, with the smoke coming out of the little black chimneys," cried Bertie, "and a little girl dressed in green and silver sitting on the steps, and a brown-faced gipsy drinking tea out of a tin can!"

"And I saw them getting ready in the square, and putting up the swings, and such a great merry-go-round, and horses a'most as big as life, and Ruffian Rob setting up his cocoa-nut shots!"

"That's what's kept Sambo from school to-day.

Let's go round, I bet anything he's helping Ruffian Rob! What a lark we'll have to-morrow!"

All Ravenswood was on the alert next day. The fair comes but once a year, and they must make the most of it while they have the chance. People came crowding in from ten miles round—every half-hour brought a fresh shoal in. How gay Ravenswood looked! and who could recognise the dull old square? Little children with bright expectant faces, and lads and lasses in their best, and men and women of all ages, up to the feeble and aged. And how the ribbons of every colour fluttered, and how the cracked bells rang, as a signal that the merry-go-round was full, and how the different organs played a variety of tunes all together, and the bang, bang, of the shots for cocoa-nuts, and the tempting fair rings, and brandy snaps, and sweets and tarts, and smells of savoury cooking, and steam rising from ready-made dishes, and tables of ice-cream piled two inches above the glasses! Little girls and boys like fairies dressed in gold and silver, dancing on the stages, and weird gipsy faces offering their goods in queer shrill voices, with their heads tied up in gaudy handkerchiefs, and coloured necklaces of beads around their necks! It was useless to talk in ordinary tones, for no one could hear, there was such a deafening noise; so everybody shouted, which added considerably to the hubbub; but it only helped the fun, and was to be expected at the fair! But the night time was the best of all, when the lights would flare and glare, and flash

upon the eager faces, and lighten up bright eyes, and show the trickling drops of scent upon the cheeks of laughing girls squirted from the hand of some rough swain! A jolly time, indeed!

Our boys were there, of course. Upon the swings, and at the shows, and on the merry-go-rounds. Bertie had saved a goodly store of pennies for this grand occasion; and his heart beat gaily as he struck his boot in tune on the rough flags, while the horses chased each other madly round and round, with half a hundred laughing children on their backs. Whenever the speckled horse with scanty tail whirled by, Bertie would nod and cheer, and the pinched face of Annie Green bobbed delightedly back; for this was his treat to her. He had seen her wandering up and down, sniffing at the good things, and eyeing the whirling horses; but to taste and have were not in Annie's power; and the brown hand dived into his trouser pockets to count the pennies he had left. There was the theatre staring him in the face, and a loud-voiced man proclaiming the wonders that were going on within; and half-a-dozen shows he had not been into yet, and everything cost a penny; but a pair of hungry eyes were devouring the ice-creams, and he had had two already.

She dropped a little curtsey when their eyes met, for she had never forgotten his former kindness to her, and, without stopping to think, he said—

“Here, Annie, here's a penny for an ice-cream—they're awfully good—and another for a ride on the horses.”

The thin hand clutched the coins, and the wild eyes alone spoke their delight, and with a deeper curtesy the little happy creature darted off; while to Bertie the fair seemed nicer than ever; and Mr. Andrews' words rang pleasantly in his ears, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." But these were the bright spots of the fair; there were dark spots and ugly blots, too, everywhere—the temptations Mr. Andrews had said he dreaded. There were drinking booths where men and lads would crowd, where idle loungers quaffed off glasses of fiery stuff, and swore and cheated and fought, and, worst of all, would urge the lads to drink—only just one glass to taste—and be a man and not a molly-coddle!

The week-day service was over at half-past eight, and Mr. Andrews had been taking supper at the vicarage that night.

"What, going so soon? It's only half-past nine!" exclaimed Mrs. Reynold, as the curate rose and held out his hand. "I was just going to ask Miss Linton to sing us another song."

"I must go earlier this evening, much as I should like to stay; I must run round to see if my boys are safe."

The temptation to linger was great—to rest after the day's work in that pleasant drawing-room, and listen to the voice of her he loved. But sounds of revelry, and drunken songs and shouts, from time to time broke in on them from the square; and who could tell if the lads were safe?

His choristers all lived in the town, and it took

but an extra five minutes up the lane where Nat and David lived. He overtook them a few steps from their door.

"Nat and David going home? Had enough of the fair?"

"Yes, sir; yes, sir."

"That's right; good-night, my lads." He had not feared for them; but it was good to know that they were home.

And all were housed, as he found out in a quarter of an hour, and the mothers thanked him kindly. Then he knocked at Martin's door, and Martin's mother answered it. She was a widow, and he her only son.

"Martin, how late you've come! The supper's well nigh cooked itself away!"

"Martin not in yet! I just looked in to see." It was the curate's voice that answered.

"Oh! come in, Mr. Andrews, come in, sir—I thought 'twas Martin. I was anxious a bit, being fair night, you see."

"I shall not come in to-night, thank you. I'll meet Martin on the way, and send him faster home. Good-night."

"Martin not in yet! ah!" And the sounds of revelry grew loud and louder.

The square was thick with people, and the clamour of tongues and jingling of bells made the night discordant. It would be as easy to look for a needle in a haystack as search for Martin there; yet he could not go home to rest, knowing that the lad was there.

He would just go round the shows and keep his eyes about—tall Martin would be easier to find than little Bertie! And then, as he hesitated, something reached his ears through the clamour, something that made them tingle and strain with an awful intenseness.

“O God!” It was his voiceless cry to heaven; for the sound was Martin’s voice, the bell-like treble of the leading chorister shrilly chanting the latest anthem he had learned. Now a sweet, clear note, now quavering, now full and rich again; and the guttural voices of revellers applauding hoarsely.

The drinking-booth was just a few yards off, and the flickering lights flared on the bloated faces of the men, loungers well known in Ravenswood, and on the flushed young brow of the singer.

With eyes distended and face as pale as death Mr. Andrews pushed his way towards them. “Martin!”

The sweet voice failed, and eyes of wonderment and terror greeted him.

“Go it, young un! Never say die! Hurrah! Blowed if it ain’t the parson!”

“Oh, men!” It was all he said; but such a look, and such a voice! The least intoxicated slunk away.

“Martin, come home!” and through the crowd he led him unresisting, with never a word, but with sighs as from a bursting heart.

“Is it Martin?” and the mother opened the door and held the light against it. “Mr. Andrews, too!”

"I have brought him home. Do not reproach him; he has been tempted. Send him to bed."

But the light fell on his face, and she shrieked out unbelievably and shook him by the shoulder.

"Mother, mother! I didn't mean to;" and the lad stumbled through the doorway. "Mother, forgive me." And she took him in her arms and they wept together. And Mr. Andrews shut the door.

The veins were knotted on his temples as he kneeled and prayed at his bedside that night; and tears of agony trickled through the thin, pale fingers. O Martin! had you seen those tears!

Rap, rap, rap! and rap, rap, rap! again. "I've never known him sleep so heavy before," said Mrs. Gunter, as she knocked again at Mr. Andrews' door. There was the hot water getting as cold as stone, and only twenty minutes to the hour of morning prayer!

"Sir, Mr. Andrews; it's almost church time, please."

She had succeeded in making him hear at last, for his voice answered her now, a voice with such a sigh in it. He had passed an unrefreshing night.

"I wouldn't have woke you, thinking the vicar could take the service alone for once, you seemed to sleep so heavy; but there's the little gipsy woman downstairs, and she's been twice to see you, a-crying and wringing her hands all about that good-for-nothing boy of hers, and she must see you, and can't go back till she does."

"Let her stay, Mrs. Gunter; tell her I'll be down presently. I wish you had called me before."

More bad news? He felt he could not bear any more to-day. Yet he came downstairs with a smile on his haggard face to welcome Sambo's mother.

"An early visit, Mrs. Finch."

"Oh! sir, I couldn't wait, and I thought you wouldn't mind for me disturbing of you. It's Sambo." She put a tattered handkerchief to her face and wiped her eyes. "He never come home last night, and this morning he has gone. The square's a'most clear, for the shows went off 'bout three this morning. And Ruffian Rob has gone and taken Sambo with him. Mr. Andrews, sir, I must get him back. He's the only thing belongs to me, and been so good and in the choir too. Who will fetch him back?"

She broke down, sobbing, adding that the people of the fair had gone to Tinley, a village ten miles off, where the shows would be held to-morrow.

"I shall fetch him back, don't break your heart, Mrs. Finch. If they've gone to Tinley, and Ruffian Rob with them, Sambo must be with him. It needn't be a very hard matter; I think I can bring him back this evening." And with some more comforting words, he dismissed the poor little weeping creature.

A train left Ravenswood every day at twelve, and passed the village of Tinley. "I must go by that train," said Mr. Andrews to himself, as he hurried off to the church. But he would have to see the vicar first, to let him know his movements, and there were other duties to be accomplished; so there was no time to lose.

He ate his breakfast hurriedly. "The best food can't do him no good when he eats it in that way, and nothing of it," said Mrs. Gunter, as she cleared away the breakfast things. "He works too hard, and worrits himself about those boys of his. If any one wants a thrashing it's that Sambo, and I'd as lief give it him myself."

There were the usual Scripture lessons to be given at the schools, and at half-past eleven he found himself at the vicarage. Mr. Reynold was very willing to spare him to go after the runaway, and Miss Linton heard of Sambo's escapade with sorrow. She walked with him through the avenue, as he had little time to lose; and what they said under the shade of the great laburnum at the gate no one ever heard, not even the curious old cronies; but Mr. Andrews parted from her with his sad face animated, and a happy light in his eyes, and ran off to the station like a veritable school-boy. He was only just in time to catch the train; and, notwithstanding his sleepless night, an old woman, who had come to see her daughter off, whispered to her friend, "I never did see Mr. Andrews look so well."

All Tinley was alive for the coming fair. A good many caravans had arrived, and some of the shows were opened now. Mr. Andrews walked round them once and soon discovered Ruffian Rob's. Sambo was piling up cocoa-nuts in a corner as rewards for those who succeeded in knocking over old grandmother Sally, whom Ruffian Rob was setting up in her accustomed place.

Sambo had just got his arms full of cocoa-nuts, when he found himself face to face with Mr. Andrews; and he started so, that the cocoa-nuts rolled away in all directions.

"Sambo, how could you leave the poor little mother broken-hearted at home? I have come to take you back to her."

"I ain't a-going back no more," said Sambo sturdily; "I'm going to make my living now."

"How?" asked Mr. Andrews.

"How? By this 'ere, to be sure;" and he pointed a grimy finger at old Sally.

"And how much of a living do you think you can make by that, my lad? It's all very well to trudge about in the summer weather, but how about the winter, in the cold, piercing wind? Think of the little room with the cosy fire, and the good mother getting supper ready, with only kind words for her erring boy."

"She's better without me," said Sambo, trying to speak as sturdily as before; but his voice was not so steady; and he shifted his eyes from Mr. Andrews' face.

"She's not better without you, for she loves you, Sambo; and after all these years of care, I dare say she looks forward to the time when you may support her, and take care of her. Come back with me, Sambo, and ask her forgiveness."

"Who wants him back?" cried a blustering voice; and Ruffian Rob stood before them in a bullying manner, with his battered hat stuck sideways on a shock of matted hair. He had

heard all they said, and now thought it time to interfere.

"His mother and I," answered the pale young curate, unflinchingly. "His mother, because she loves him, and I—because his soul is in my care, and I shall have to answer to God for him."

"That all sounds werry nice, mister," said Ruffian Rob, "but my nevvv has got to earn a living, which he can't do without me. He wants me, and I want him; what have you got to say to that?"

"A lady who has this lad's welfare at heart has given me a sovereign to offer you as a recompense, in case you should suffer any loss by my taking Sambo away with me at once."

Mr. Andrews held the shining coin between his finger and thumb, and a change passed over Ruffian Rob's face, and his eyes devoured it greedily.

"Was it Miss Linton?" asked Sambo eagerly.

"If the lad's willing, I'm willing," said Ruffian Rob, before Mr. Andrews could answer, "so settle that with yourselves, mister;" and he spat on the ground, and scratched his head with the rim of his battered hat.

"Was it Miss Linton?" again asked Sambo.

"Yes, Sambo; and more than that;" Mr. Andrews bent his face nearer the boy's; "she says if you will come back to your mother, and be a good son for a few weeks longer, she will take you into her employ altogether, to weed her garden and tend her flowers, for she is going to stay at Ravenswood for good; Miss Linton has promised to be my wife." The last words were spoken triumphantly; and the

curate's eyes glowed. "What do you say to that, Sambo?"

"Why, she's an out and outer," cried Sambo, wonderingly.

"If you mean that Miss Linton is the best and most beautiful woman in the world, I agree with you, Sambo," cried the curate, laughing.

"Ay, that she is!"

"And what about coming home?"

He cast one reluctant glance at old grandmother Sally. "I'll come," he said. "I'd do anything to please her—I've wanted often to be her servant."

"Then the sovereign is yours," said Mr. Andrews, putting it into the gipsy's outstretched palm.

Ruffian Rob touched his hat respectfully for once in his life, and said heartily, "And thank ye kindly, sir. Now, Sambo, be off with the gen'leman, and do yer dooty by 'im and 'is lady."

There is no need to describe the little gipsy woman's joy as she wept over the runaway. Sambo never regretted having come back, for even in that short time he had found out that Ruffian Rob was not the softest of uncles to serve. A little talk with Miss Linton completed his satisfaction, and he walked home from the vicarage, holding his head very high indeed.





CHAPTER XV.

THE WEDDING MARCH.

THE leaves on the trees were changing colour now, and autumn in all her glory was reigning over Ravenswood. It was a glorious evening. Mr. Andrews with his boys had been taking a stroll across the fields after the choir practice. They were as dear to him as ever, though he had so much just now to occupy his mind and heart; and, best of all, he was surer of them now. Of Martin—ah, poor Martin! Never could he forget that night of the fair. It was a lesson always imprinted on his memory. He never saw so clearly before, how weak he was to resist temptation; and the awful sin into which he had fallen so humbled and frightened him, that he became more careful, more vigilant, struggling hard against his weakness; and the good curate watched with joy the boy's general improvement.

To-morrow would be Mr. Andrews' wedding-day, and all Ravenswood was alert and busy. When the morning dawned, floral arches decked the streets, and flags and banners made them gayer still.

It was nearing ten o'clock, and the villagers were fast making their way to the church to secure good places even an hour beforehand. David, too, was sauntering along, stopping to admire the decorations he had helped to put up ever since it was light this morning. He had an important part to play, and felt rather consequential; for old Matthew Evans was suffering from rheumatism in the fingers, and David was to take his place at the organ.

"Ha! my fine fellow!" cried a voice in his ear; and he felt it pulled by somebody behind, and, turning somewhat indignantly, David encountered the grand old French musician, whom he had not seen since his last lesson more than a year ago.

"Sir!" he stammered, "Monseer!"

"*Oui*, Monseer," echoed the Frenchman in imitation of David. "Ha! you not forget. I not forget; I follow you up! and what you mean to waste the talent the good God give you? You not come near me for a year! Answer me that;" and Monsieur took David's ear between his fingers again, and pulled it rather severely.

He had not forgotten him, then, David thought with a thrill of joy—the great master had kept him in remembrance!

It was a long story—it could not be all told in a breath. "Monseer," said the lad, with flushing face, "walk with me a little way, and I shall tell you all."

"*Eh bien!* Speak on, my fine fellow. Chut, chut, chut; the waste of a year!"

Before David had spoken five minutes the Frenchman grasped it all, and broke in impetuously.

"And you not trust me! you leave me watching in vain for my promising pupil! Why you not come and confide in me?"

"How could I know, Monseer," said the lad, with a burning face. "Mr. Linton was dead, and I was penniless—why should I come to you?"

"Ah, bah! you should trust me. Do you think I turn you from my door with the talent the good God give you? No, I help you all the more. Never mind—ah, but that year of waste! You come to me next week and begin again. Who talks of payment? Listen, my lad, if the good God not give me my talent, perhaps I walk this same town a beggar."

He would listen to no thanks. The boy's glowing eyes and flushed eager face were thanks enough for him. Before the church was reached they knew more of each other in the last ten minutes than during all the previous months together. David told him the reason of the arches and the fluttering flags, and a bright blush burned on his cheek when he let him know the part he had to play.

"*Eh bien!* 'Twas a good morning that I walked too far and lost myself in your village. I shall come and hear you play."

And now the church refuses to hold one person more; the very aisles are thronged, as the eyes of the parishioners gaze proudly on the bride and bridegroom kneeling before the altar.

"Well, well, she is a lovely lady," whispers an old crony to her friend.

"And he is 'andsome is as 'andsome does," retorts her neighbour. "Bless 'em both!"

Ay, bless them both! And now the throng is clearing out to line the streets, and throw the rice, while the grand music of the Wedding March swells up to the very rafters; and here and there a voice whispers—

"Just hark at David Barnes!"

And some one else is listening to David Barnes—the Frenchman with his grey head bowed, clapping his hands softly together.

"Bravo, bravo! I make musician of that boy yet!"

Then the bride and bridegroom come out arm in arm, so lovely and so happy; and a great cheer rends the air as the handfuls of rice are thrown, drowning some feeble voices whispering—"God bless them!"

And we say "God bless them," too, as we say good-bye to them.

THE END.

